



**PRESS RELEASE – Monday 30th January 2023**

## **The fate of asylum seeking children at Home Office hotels – A child protection failure of unprecedented proportions**

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The deeply distressing news of the unthinkable treatment of asylum seeking children<sup>1</sup> and the equally distressing news of over 200 children going missing outside of Home Office hotel accommodation<sup>2</sup>, has caused outrage to those of whom it reached in its media coverage this week. The issue of asylum seeking children has become needlessly incendiary in recent years. What remains at the heart of this issue, irrespective, is a catastrophic failure to protect the most vulnerable.

For us at My Family Group this is an issue we squarely see as our concern and one we simply cannot ignore. We have been working with our partners in Brighton and Hove for over a year now to actively assist in the recruitment of foster carers, support existing carers of Muslim-heritage unaccompanied asylum seeking children (UASCs) and to build better links between local organisations and mosques so that UASCs in the care of the local authority receive the support that they need.

Our maxim is 'it takes a community to raise a child', that all of us need to work together to raise a child whose birth parents for whatever reason are unable to do so. The core of our work is advocacy for the child in care, to provide a voice for the voiceless and it is our firm belief that every child deserves a family. This process of placing a child with a supportive family is what we do when we work with our partners - bring families forward to support and prepare them to become foster carers to ultimately care for these children.

We believe that the best choice for a child is with a family and where this isn't possible than regulated care homes or supported lodgings should be available. We have unequivocally always been against placing children in unregulated care settings and settings that mean children have no parental care and since 2021 we have strongly opposed the Home Office practice of placing children in hotel accommodation. We were a signatory of a letter that ECPAT (Every Child Protected Against Trafficking UK) sent the government in August 2022 which called for an 'immediately cease the unacceptable practice of housing children in hotels.'<sup>3</sup>

We welcomed the Independent Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration recommendation in October 2022 for the Home Office to begin delivering on 'a viable and sustainable exit strategy from the use of hotels' reminding the Home Office of its Section 55 duty as well as the principle of the 'best interests' of the child.<sup>4</sup> However, we disagreed that this strategy should have had six months to be developed, this should be happening immediately. As recent tragic events have told, the risk is just too great.

The use of hotels for separated children was initially characterised by the Home Office as an "emergency" measure to be operated for "the very shortest of periods", it has continued for some 18 months. We believe this practice is unlawful and does not safeguard these children. Hundreds of children that have gone missing or have been abducted and the Home Office has repeatedly failed to commit to an end date for housing children in this way.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2023/jan/29/the-observer-view-on-britains-shameful-failings-on-child-refugees>

<sup>2</sup> <https://metro.co.uk/2023/01/25/child-asylum-seekers-have-gone-missing-from-uk-hotels-where-is-the-outcry-18166028/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.ecpat.org.uk/news/unaccompanied-children-must-be-protected-by-the-care-system-not-placed-in-hotels>

<sup>4</sup> [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/1111982/An\\_inspecti\\_on\\_of\\_the\\_use\\_of\\_hotels\\_for\\_housing\\_unaccompanied\\_asylum-seeking\\_children\\_UASC\\_March\\_to\\_May\\_2022.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1111982/An_inspecti_on_of_the_use_of_hotels_for_housing_unaccompanied_asylum-seeking_children_UASC_March_to_May_2022.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/response-to-a-report-on-hotels-for-housing-unaccompanied-asylum-seeking-children/response-to-a-report-on-hotels-for-housing-unaccompanied-asylum-seeking-children-march-to-may-2022>

To keep children in unregulated hotel settings for significant periods of time adds to the vulnerabilities the children face, and is a dereliction of our duty to safeguard them. It is an extremely dangerous practice and carries very high risks, putting already traumatised children in an extremely unsafe situation. It should be clearly understood that these young people do not have proper care, nor is there an adult or a parent taking responsibility over them, something that should be avoided at all costs. These risks increase over the length of time children are placed in these unsafe settings – currently, we are seeing children remain in hotels for extended periods of time. We believe this is clearly unlawful by all counts. There is no legal basis for placing children in hotel accommodation, and we are now two years into a Home Office scheme which does just that.

We cannot expect that the Home Office continue to justify the use of hotels as being ‘temporary’. We believe this is a significant departure from the Children Act 1989 and established standards, including those identified in the Home Office’s Every Child Matters: Change for Children statutory guidance issued under section 55 of the Borders, Citizenship and Immigration Act 2009, which requires prompt referral of children to local authority care. The National Transfer Scheme, implemented through section 72 of the Immigration Act 2016, had the specific aim of ensuring responsibility for looking after unaccompanied children was to be borne by local authorities. The longer these children are kept in hotels and with recent revelations of children going missing and the horrifying treatment they face, it is clear that the Home Office is failing in its responsibility towards them.

We spoke out against this practice in August last year, with the launch of ECPATs ‘Outside the Frame’ report, which revealed that over 1600 children who arrived alone in England between July 2021 and June 2020 were placed in hotel accommodation directly by the Home Office. Then, and now, we demanded that all UASCs who arrive in the UK should be put into local authority care immediately, with access to children social worker teams and a responsible adult with shared with parental responsibility.<sup>6</sup> Today, once again, we reiterate this demand.

We were further shocked to read that the Independent Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration had noted that “the Home Office had not provided mental health support within the hotels, and questions asked of young people which might reveal mental health concerns were constructed in such a way as to avoid close examination.” And that this was “problematic for young people who were not placed promptly, or whose trauma required addressing more immediately.”<sup>7</sup>

We therefore strongly recommend that there should be a dedicated support line available to these unaccompanied, asylum seeking children where they can seek pastoral care which is culturally sensitive and accessible and considerate of any language barrier. And that all UASCs who arrive in the UK should have access to a support group and safe space to connect with other young people who have shared similar experiences to them.

Our biggest concern in August 2022 was that 45 children, some as young as 11 had gone missing over this 10 month period while waiting in Home Office hotel accommodation.<sup>8</sup>

Despite multiple warnings from charities to the Secretary of State for the Home Department, the Secretary of State for Education, Directors of Children’s Services, OFSTED, and a report by the Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration, it has now emerged that many more children have gone missing from the hotels, targeted by criminal networks and likely now face exploitation and other forms of significant harm including racial and emotional abuse.<sup>9 10</sup>

The latest information provided by a government Minister on 21 October 2022 confirmed that from July 2021 to 19 October 2022, there had been 391 missing episodes of young people from the Home Office UASC Hotels and of which 15 have been missing for over 6 months. The information also confirmed that 222 children who went missing from these hotels have never been found.<sup>11</sup> Serious questions remain about the safety of these children. Where are they? Who are they with? Are they safe? What is happening to them? All of these questions remain unanswered and this remains a significant concern. There are simply no words that can convey our shock and dismay.

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.ecpat.org.uk/news/unaccompanied-children-must-be-protected-by-the-care-system-not-placed-in-hotels>

<sup>7</sup> [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/1111982/An\\_inspection\\_of\\_the\\_use\\_of\\_hotels\\_for\\_housing\\_unaccompanied\\_asylum-seeking\\_children\\_UASC\\_March\\_to\\_May\\_2022.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1111982/An_inspection_of_the_use_of_hotels_for_housing_unaccompanied_asylum-seeking_children_UASC_March_to_May_2022.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.ecpat.org.uk/outside-the-frame-unaccompanied-children-denied-care-and-protection>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2023/jan/21/they-just-vanish-whistleblowers-met-by-wall-of-complacency-over-missing-migrant-children>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2023/jan/29/the-observer-view-on-britains-shameful-failings-on-child-refugees>

<sup>11</sup> <https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2022-10-18/65898>

We have last week added our signature to a letter written directly to the Prime minister alongside ECPAT and Children England and a number of other charities to express our grave concern that UASCs are going missing, suspected of being trafficked and criminally exploited from hotels where they have continued to be accommodated by the Home Office. We continue to make urgent requests to Ministers and government departments to discontinue this practice in light of all the evidence that these children face significant harm. And we stand by the comments of a local councillor in describing this as “an unprecedented child safeguarding catastrophe”.<sup>12</sup>

It deeply worries us to see an unprecedented and growing trend in dehumanising language around asylum seekers and UASCs. We feel that present coverage of the issue does little to properly humanise the plight of these UASCs, many who also happen to be Muslim children. We find it beyond belief to hear about the treatment of these children under Home Office staff, and that while Home Office staff had been made aware that some of these children are being approached by drug dealers, and led into trafficking or towards exploitation, little or nothing was done about this or to find out about their whereabouts or their wellbeing once they went missing. With further revelations of the shocking treatment these children have faced in these hotels this week, we stand with Patricia Durr CEO of ECPAT that this is a “scandalous and growing child protection failure”.<sup>13</sup>

That being said, we want to acknowledge the work of Brighton and Hove Muslim Forum for standing up for Muslim asylum seeker families when they had been discouraged from fasting in Ramadan, and fighting for their cause when they had not been allowed to leave the hotel for evening ‘*tarawih*’ prayers in Ramadan. We also want to recognise the work of all our partners in the area who have supported UASCs and Muslim asylum seeker families with resources and we thank the local faith communities for opening their doors to support these children and Medina Mosque in Brighton for welcoming UASCs into their youth programmes.

### **Calls to Action**

We demand a public enquiry into the Home Office practice of using hotels to house these children and issue a general call for all join us in demanding an end to the dehumanisation of asylum seeking children.

We call upon the Muslim community and Muslim organisations in specific, to speak out against this continuing harmful practice and to stand with us to advocate for these children and to call out the unprecedented level of failure to care and safeguard them.

Together with our partners in the area we have made an urgent call for foster carers and alternative provisions to the hotels being used to house UASCs. We make the same call and stand ready to support anyone coming forward as a foster carer to take in these children and encourage all those who live in the area that can support or help raise awareness to get in touch with us.

### **Facts**

1. The practice to house UASCs in hotels was initiated by the Home Office 18 months ago.
2. Since then, 220 children have gone missing and it is unclear if any of them have been found.
3. The majority of these children come from a Muslim-heritage background.
4. These children have suffered significant trauma before they have been placed in hotel accommodation, some have fled war torn countries and others may have been abused or exploited on their journey here to the UK.
5. All these children are seeking asylum and safety from harm.
6. No mental health support is being provided to these children while they remain in hotel accommodation
7. No adult with parental care responsibilities has been allocated for these children while they remain in hotel accommodation
8. We are unaware of any other child protection failure by the UK government of this magnitude.

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<sup>12</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2023/jan/21/they-just-vanish-whistleblowers-met-by-wall-of-complacency-over-missing-migrant-children>

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2023/jan/28/child-migrants-racially-abused-home-office-hotel-brighton-criminals>

## About My Foster Family and My Family Group

My Foster Family is an initiative of My Family Group CIC, Company Number 11729361. We are a not-for-profit advocacy for Muslim children in Care and Muslim Carers and a company aimed focussed on adding social value.

My Family Group is a collective of initiatives designed to improve the lives of children in care. We work to ensure every child who comes into care secures a loving and nurturing home that meets their needs, strengthens their identity and prepares them for adult life. My Family Group has steadily grown to include a number of services that meet the often complex needs of Muslim-heritage children in the care system. We work collaboratively with colleagues from across the sector for the betterment of Muslim-heritage children in care, and better understanding and practice across the care sector.

Our vision is to see every Muslim-heritage child who comes into care find a home that meets their needs, strengthens their identity and prepares them for adult life. We aim do this by raising awareness and influencing policy around children in care, by working to ensure that appropriate support is there for them and their carers and by promoting training and best practice to ensure better outcomes for care-experienced people.

## My Foster Family and My Family Group Contacts and Social Media Handles

[www.twitter.com/Mfosterfamily](https://www.twitter.com/Mfosterfamily)  
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