

The Rt Hon Suella Braverman KC MP
Secretary of State for the Home Department
Home Office

By email

31 March 2023

Dear Home Secretary,

Asylum - unaccompanied children

The JCHR launched its legislative scrutiny of the Illegal Migration Bill at the end of last week. Since November 2022, we have also been conducting a broader, thematic inquiry on the human rights of asylum seekers in the UK.

The Home Affairs Committee launched its own inquiry on human trafficking in February 2023, assessing the scale of human trafficking in the UK and the different forms it takes, and investigating possible improvements to the system to further protect its victims and prosecute its perpetrators.

During the course of these inquiries, both committees have become increasingly concerned about the plight of unaccompanied children seeking asylum in the UK. Of particular concern is the gradual morphing of what was originally described by the Government in July 2021 as a temporary arrangement for the housing of those children in hotels ‘whilst we are finding them more appropriate long term care placements under the voluntary [National Transfer Scheme]’ into what, with the passage of 20 months, appears increasingly like a permanent approach to the accommodation of these vulnerable children.

Such arrangements – whether temporary or permanent – mean that these children are falling further and further outside the safeguarding provisions of the Children Act and related legal provisions, and the established standards for suitable accommodation, care, and support for children in need, leaving them – inevitably - increasingly vulnerable to abuses including abduction, trafficking and modern slavery.

The stark fact of the vulnerability of these children is made clear by the fact that there were 444 “missing episodes” between 1 September 2021 and 28 February 2023, and only on 253 of these occasions the young person was subsequently located.¹ As Professor Dame Sara Thornton, the last Anti-Slavery Commissioner, said in her evidence to the JCHR on 15 March:

¹ [PQ 156233 \[Asylum: Children\]](#), 6 March 2023

'I am gravely concerned that there has not been more of an outcry about this. It seems to me highly likely that these children and young people will be in situations of exploitation. They might be in cannabis farms; the young women, I am afraid, might be in brothels or just being forced into exploitative work. That is the reality.'

Alex Burghart, the Director of Strategy and Advocacy for the Children's Commissioner for England has said:

'I am afraid that children going missing comes across as poor care. It happens if children are put into poor-quality children's homes: you see a big spike in missing incidents.'

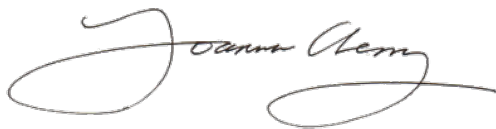
In July 2022, the Home Affairs Committee observed that the ongoing use of hotel accommodation was "not acceptable" and that "[t]he Government must provide a clear timeline for ending the accommodation of unaccompanied children in hotels". Yet the practice continues.

We write now to ask you to do two things. First, we would like you to update us on progress on finding the children who have gone missing from asylum hotel accommodation. It is simply unacceptable that unaccompanied children can disappear from our streets at all, let alone in such large numbers.

Secondly, we ask that you tell us what action you are taking to end the use of unsuitable hotel accommodation to prevent children going missing and potentially falling into the hands of traffickers and into modern slavery here within the UK. It appears to us that there is an opportunity for the Illegal Migration Bill to be used to rectify what is clearly a national scandal. Instead, the Bill at the moment formalises and perpetuates the current unsatisfactory approach, not least by putting Home Office accommodation onto a statutory footing, implying permanence, and allowing the Home Office to direct a local authority to transfer an unaccompanied child from local authority care into Home Office accommodation.

We would appreciate a response to these two points as soon as possible, and before the return of the House of Commons after the Easter Recess on 17 April.

Yours sincerely,



Joanna Cherry KC MP
Chair, Joint Committee on Human Rights



Rt Hon Dame Diana Johnson MP,
Chair, Home Affairs Committee