Until Harm Ends:

An update report on trafficked and unaccompanied children going missing from care in the UK

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Missing People is the only charity in the UK which is dedicated to bringing missing children and adults back together with their families. We are here for missing people and their families 365 days a year. Understanding the reasons why people go missing and the impact on families left behind enables Missing People and our partners to provide better services. Missing People's research team conducts research and evaluation projects on a range of topics. **www.missingpeople.org.uk/research**

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Authors:
Jane Hunter Missing People
Laura Durán ECPAT UK

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Research background

ECPAT UK and Missing People have previously published research into the scale of unaccompanied and trafficked children going missing from care in the UK.[1] This research revealed that an alarmingly high number of these children were going missing from care, with some never found. Data from 2014 to 2020 found that over one in four trafficked children and one in ten unaccompanied children go missing from care, highlighting continuing risks and systemic failures in protecting these children.[2]

ECPAT UK and Missing People recognise the need to continue building understanding of this issue and tracking changes over time. This report provides an update on the findings of the earlier studies, focusing on the years 2021, 2022, 2023 and 2024. As in previous research, our findings are based on responses from Local Authority Children's Services to Freedom of Information (FOI) requests issued under the Freedom of Information Act 2000 to all local authorities in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland with responsibility for children's social care.

Trafficked and unaccompanied children going missing from care background

Evidence shows that children who are not living with their parents face a heightened risk of going missing.[3] Children in care are disproportionately represented in police missing persons reports compared to children in family settings.[4] Research has also shown links between going missing and exploitation, including child trafficking for sexual exploitation, and child criminal exploitation.[5] Some children may go missing as a result of being exploited, while others may be exposed to an increased risk of exploitation or abuse while being missing.[6]

The Group of Experts on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings (GRETA) has repeatedly raised concerns regarding children going missing from care in the UK.[7] In its third evaluation of the UK's implementation of the Council of Europe Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings (ECAT), GRETA recalled that it had already urged the UK authorities in its second report to address the problem of children disappearing from local authority care.[8] While acknowledging steps taken by the UK authorities, such as the then update: 'in 2023' of the Working Together to Safeguard Children statutory guidance, these measures have not led to a reduction in the rates of child victims or unaccompanied children going missing from care. GRETA is now conducting its fourth-round evaluation of the UK's implementation of ECAT.

There continues to be no central government data on the numbers of trafficked and unaccompanied children who go missing from care. Local authorities hold this information, but many do not record it in a consistent or accessible format. Our earlier reports highlighted the lack of uniformity in how local authorities identify and record cases of child trafficking and exploitation, and these challenges persist.

[1] ECPAT UK and Missing People. (2016). Heading Back to Harm; ECPAT UK and Missing People. (2019). Still in Harm's Way; ECPAT UK and Missing People. (2021). When Harm Remains.

[2] *Ibid.*

[3] Rees, G. (2011). Still Running 3.

[4] Ibid; Hayden, C., & Goodship, J. (2013). Children reported 'missing' to the police: is it possible to 'risk assess' every incident?; Hayden, C. (2017). 'Children Missing from Care'. In K. Shalev- Greene K. and L. Alys. (eds.). Missing Persons: A Handbook of Research. Abingdon, Oxon; New York, NY: Taylor & Francis.

[5] Ibid; Cockbain, E. et al. (2015). Immaterial Boys? A Large-Scale Exploration of Gender-Based Differences in Child Sexual Exploitation Service Users. Sexual Abuse: A Journal of Research and Treatment.

[6] Sharp-Jeffs, N. (2016). A lot going on: the links between going missing, forced marriage and child sexual exploitation.

[7] Group of Experts on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings. (2016). Report concerning the implementation of the Council of Europe Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings by the United Kingdom Second Evaluation Round.

[8] Group of Experts on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings. (2021). Report concerning the implementation of the Council of Europe Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings by the United Kingdom Third Evaluation Round.

Methodology

The FOI request for this report sought data on the total number of children identified as, or suspected of being, victims of human trafficking and modern slavery, and the number of unaccompanied and separated children in care, who went missing in the years 2021–2024. The request asked local authorities to provide:

- Total numbers of children in care suspected or identified as a victim of human trafficking and modern slavery
- Total number of unaccompanied children and separated children in care
- Total numbers of each cohort who had gone missing
- Total number of missing incidents of each cohort
- Total number of children still missing

Please note that not all local authorities responded to the request, and those that did were not always able to share the data requested. Where relevant this report includes how many local authorities shared the data used in the findings. In particular, note that the data shared for 2024 was more complete than that shared in relation to 2021, 2022 and 2023. This means that the data should not be used to determine trends in overall populations of trafficked or unaccompanied children in care, rather it should be used to show the prevalence of missing within those populations.

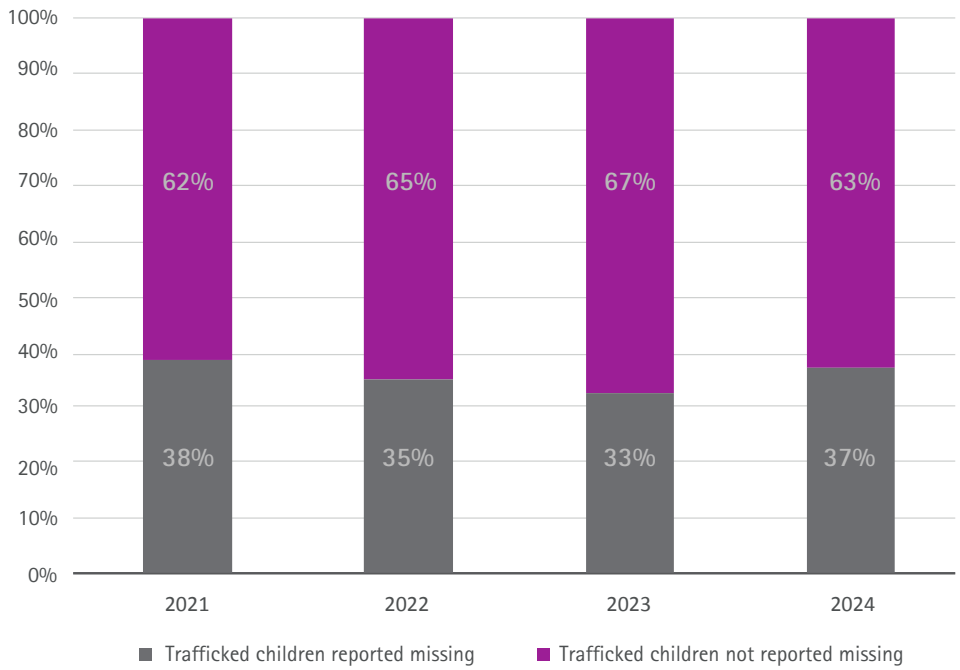
Findings

Child victims of trafficking and modern slavery

- In 2024, 2,638 children in local authority care were identified or suspected as being trafficked.[9]
- The rate of identified and suspected trafficked children who have gone missing from local authority care of those identified has remained consistent, from 38% in 2021 to 37% in 2024.
- Trafficked children continue to be one of the groups who are most at risk of going missing in the UK: nearly 2 in 5 went missing in 2024 (37%)[10] and 2021 (39%),[11] and 1 in 3 in 2023 (33%)[12] and 2022 (35%).[13] This compares to 1 in 10 looked after children in England reported missing in 2024.[14]
- Trafficked children also go missing more frequently than the looked after children population: in 2024, trafficked children went missing on average 12 times per missing children.[15] This is significantly higher than for the looked after children population, which was 6.5 missing incidents per child in 2024.[16]

Previous research has shown that trafficked children are at very high risk of going missing, a pattern that has continued from 2021 to 2024. In all four years at least 1 in 3 children identified or suspected of having been trafficked went missing from local authority care, with some years seeing nearly 2 in 5 being reported missing.

Proportion of trafficked children reported missing from local authority care



[9] 146 local authorities were able to share this data. The total figures suggest a significant increase from the previous year 2023 (1,565), yet this is likely a result of better data collection and response from local authorities in 2024.

[10] 135 local authorities were able to share this data

[11] 89 local authorities were able to share this data

[12] 93 local authorities were able to share this data

[13] 92 local authorities were able to share this data

[14] Department for Education. (2024). Children looked after in England including adoptions. Children missing or away from placement without authorisation.

[15] 134 local authorities were able to share this data

[16] Ibid.

Trafficked children missing from care, 2021-2024

Year and number of local authorities providing data[17]	Number of trafficked children in local authority care	Number of trafficked children reported missing from care	Percentage of trafficked children reported missing from care
2021 (89 local authorities)	1159	445	38%
2022 (92 local authorities)	1642	574	35%
2023 (93 local authorities)	1565	511	33%
2024 (135 local authorities)	2335	864	37%

Missing trafficked children were also shown to go missing from care more frequently than other populations of missing children. While ach child going missing fr m care will go on averag 6.5 times, for trafficked children in care the number of missing incidents are much higher.

Number of missing incidents for trafficked children reported missing from care, 2021-2[18]

Year and number of local authorities providing data[19]	Number of trafficked children reported missing from care	Number of missing incidents	Average number of missing incidents per child
2021 (83 local authorities)	435	3974	9.1
2022 (86 local authorities)	534	3939	7.4
2023 (88 local authorities)	505	4767	9.4
2024 (134 local authorities)	796	9541	12.0

[17] The total figures in this table should not be used to determine trends of overall numbers of trafficked children in care or of trafficked children going missing from care. This is because the data quality varied significantly across the 4 years of data collection, with significantly more local authorities able to share data in 2024 than in previous years. Please note that this table includes data from those local authorities able to share data on the number of trafficked children and the number of trafficked children going missing from care. Those unable to report on the number of trafficked children going missing have been excluded from the table.

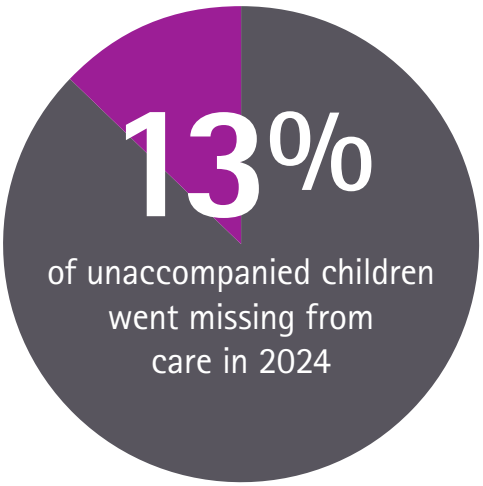
[18] Note that the data on numbers of missing children in this table is different from the table above. Those local authorities that were unable to provide data on missing incidents were excluded from this analysis.

[19] The total figures in this table should not be used to determine trends of overall numbers of trafficked children in care or of trafficked children going missing from care. This is because the data quality varied significantly across the 4 years of data collection, with significantly more local authorities able to share data in 2024 than in previous years.

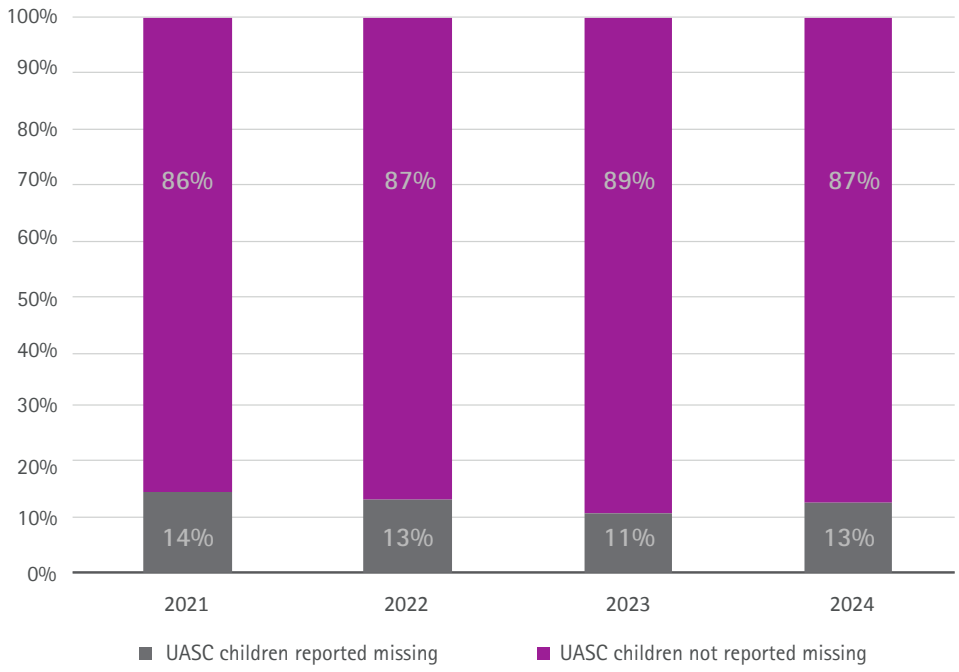
Unaccompanied children

- In 2024, 12,530 unaccompanied children were in local authority care.[20]
- 13% of unaccompanied children went missing from care in 2024 (1,501 of 11,999).[21]
- The average number of missing incidents per unaccompanied child was 2.9 in 2024, which is fewer than the average number for the wider looked after children population, which was 6.5 missing incidents per child in 2024.[22]

The proportion of unaccompanied children going missing from care is slightly higher than the children in care population more broadly, with around 13% going missing, compared to 10%.



Proportion of unaccompanied children reported missing from local authority care



[20] 159 local authorities were able to share this information

[21] 141 local authorities were able to share this information

[22] *Ibid.*

Unaccompanied children missing from care, 2021-2024

Year and number of local authorities providing data [23]	Number of unaccompanied children in local authority care	Number of unaccompanied children reported missing from care	Percentage of unaccompanied children reported missing from care
2021 (122 local authorities)	5466	787	14%
2022 (124 local authorities)	7643	994	13%
2023 (126 local authorities)	9761	1029	11%
2024 (141 local authorities)	11999	1501	13%

While unaccompanied chil ren are often facing signi cant risks, this data show that they go missing less frequently than some other populations of missing children. Across 2021-2024 unaccompanied children went missing in the region of 3 times, which is fewer that the 6.5 for children in care more broadly.

Number of missing incidents for unaccompanied children reported missing from care, 2021-24[24]

Year and number of local authorities providing data[25]	Number of unaccompanied children reported missing from care	Number of missing incidents	Average number of missing incidents per child
2021 (115 local authorities)	768	2003	2.6
2022 (114 local authorities)	937	2706	2.9
2023 (120 local authorities)	1020	3155	3.1
2024 (137 local authorities)	1488	4335	2.9

[23] The total figures in this table should not be used to determine trends of overall numbers of trafficked children in care or of trafficked children going missing from care. This is because the data quality varied significantly across the 4 years of data collection, with significantly more local authorities able to share data in 2024 than in previous years. Please note that this table includes data from those local authorities able to share data on the number of unaccompanied children and the number of unaccompanied children going missing from care. Those unable to report on the number of unaccompanied children going missing have been excluded from the table.

[24] The data on numbers of missing children in this table is different from the table above. Those local authorities that were unable to provide data on missing incidents were excluded from this analysis.

[25] The total figures in this table should not be used to determine trends of overall numbers of unaccompanied children in care or of trafficked children going missing from care. This is because the data quality varied significantly across the 4 years of data collection, with significantly more local authorities able to share data in 2024 than in previous years.

Legislative and Policy Context

The UK government has binding obligations under a range of international treaties to uphold children's rights and to prevent and address child trafficking and exploitation. Children identified as victims of trafficking are entitled to tailored assistance, protection, and long-term support in line with these international standards. Within the UK, local authorities hold statutory duties to safeguard and support trafficked and unaccompanied children under existing child protection frameworks.

Since 2015, each of the four UK nations has introduced primary legislation on human trafficking and modern slavery. Alongside this, statutory services have specific responsibilities towards children in care who go missing, recognising the heightened risks faced by this group.

The National Referral Mechanism (NRM) for children

The National Referral Mechanism (NRM) is the mechanism for identifying victims of trafficking. A positive development has been the piloting of a devolved decision-making model for children within the NRM launched in 2021.[26] Initially operating in 10 pilot sites, it now covers 20 sites across 30 local authorities in England, Scotland and Wales, with a further seven areas preparing to join from November 2025.[27] This was a central recommendation of Still in Harm's Way and has also been supported by ECPAT UK and the Independent Anti-Slavery Commissioner, both of whom have called for multi-agency decisions to be made locally by statutory safeguarding partners.[28] The evaluation of the pilot described the benefits as enhancing the safeguarding structures that already existed, as many sites already had strong multi-agency partnerships. However, reducing the risk of children going missing was not specifically cited.[29] Evaluation of the pilot has shown quicker and better-informed decisions, improved local understanding of trafficking, and stronger multi-agency collaboration. This is supported by recent quarterly statistics.[30]

Yet even in pilot areas, some children remain excluded from their cases being determined by panel members. This includes children who are within 100 days of their 18th birthday, those with disputed ages, and those being considered for Public Order Disqualification. These groups are among the most vulnerable, often with complex exploitation histories or criminal records linked to their abuse. Their continued exclusion highlights the uneven reach of the pilot and the need for a full national rollout to ensure that all child victims benefit from timely, informed, and multi-agency decisions.

The Nationality and Borders Act 2022 introduced some of the most far-reaching reforms to the UK's asylum and trafficking systems in recent years, many of which have undermined safeguards for children. From January 2023, the Act allowed the Government to raise the evidential threshold for a Reasonable Grounds (RG) decisions in the NRM. For children, this has proved especially damaging given the limited evidence available at such an early stage of the process. This resulted in a sharp rise in negative RG decisions up from 10% in 2022 to 27% by the last quarter of 2023 particularly for cases involving overseas exploitation.[31] It is challenging to determine whether this change has directly led to an increase in trafficked children going missing. Previous research has detailed how protracted legal processes and being disbelieved contributes to an erosion of trust with public authorities increasing the likelihood of missing and re-trafficking.[32]

[26] Home Office. (2025). Devolving child decision making pilot programme: general guidance.

[27] *Ibid.*

[28] Independent Anti-Slavery Commissioner and ECPAT UK. (2020). A review of what works in multi-agency decision making and the implications for child victims of trafficking.

[29] Home Office. (2024). An evaluation of the pilot to devolve decision-making for child victims of modern slavery.

[30] ECPAT UK. (2025). Positive Results for Local NRM Panels, but Thousands of Child Victims Remain Outside the Pilot.

[31] Magugliani, N. et al. (2024). Assessing the Modern Slavery Impacts of the Nationality and Borders Act: One Year On

[32] ECPAT UK and Missing People. (2016). Heading Back to Harm; ECPAT UK and Missing People. (2019). Still in Harm's Way; ECPAT UK and Missing People. (2021). When Harm Remains.

The Act also introduced "public order disqualification" provisions, excluding individuals from protection if they had served a custodial sentence of more than a year or were prosecuted for certain offences. Although the policy was later withdrawn following litigation and replaced in January 2024 with a revised framework requiring assessment of re-trafficking risk, research shows that children exploited for crime remain disproportionately affected by disqualification decisions.[33] This power is extended in Section 29 of the Illegal Migration Act 2023, which if enacted, would make the disqualification of victims a 'duty', rather than a 'discretion'. It also extends the scope of the disqualification to victims convicted of an offence of any length of sentence.

Despite the Government repealing all other modern slavery provisions in the Illegal Migration Act through the current Border Security, Asylum and Immigration Bill 2025, it has declined to also repeal these provisions *'so that we can examine the national referral mechanism and agree with partners our priorities for long-term reform.'*[34]

Immigration insecurity

Insecure immigration status can heighten vulnerability to further harm, with previous research from ECPAT UK and Missing People showing that uncertainty over a child's right to remain in the UK often contributes to them going missing from care, placing them at significant risk of re-trafficking and renewed exploitation. In 2024, 4,240 confirmed victims of trafficking were considered for a grant of leave to remain. Among them, 699 were confirmed child victims identified as requiring immigration leave, yet fewer than five were granted temporary permission to stay.[35] This represents a severe gap in protection and highlights systemic barriers to securing lawful immigration status for exploited children.

Section 65 of the Nationality and Borders Act 2022 came into force on 30 January 2023, introducing new Immigration Rules for granting Temporary Permission to Stay (VTS leave) to confirmed victims of trafficking.[36] Under these rules, leave is granted only in limited circumstances, specifically to enable recovery from physical or psychological harm, to pursue compensation where this cannot be done remotely, or to cooperate with criminal investigations or proceedings. Crucially, if a person's needs are deemed "capable of being met" in their country of origin, leave will not be granted.

In response to litigation, the Home Office amended aspects of its guidance in October 2024, particularly concerning the assessment of access to psychological support on return.[37] Further procedural amendments and a pause on the policy were made in 2025, yet the issues impacting children have never been addressed.[38] The current policy remains overly restrictive placing a high evidential burden on survivors, requiring prescriptive written evidence through a "current circumstances questionnaire," and failing to consider the best interest of the child.[39]

The UK's current approach is inconsistent with its international obligations under Article 14(2) of the Council of Europe Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings (ECAT), which specifically recognises the unique circumstances of child victims setting out that: *"the residence permit for child victims, when legally necessary, shall be issued in accordance with the best interests of the child and, where appropriate, renewed under the same conditions".* The explanatory report to ECAT goes

[33] Matrix Chambers. (2023). High Court Orders no Public Disqualifications of Slavery Victims May Take Place without a Risk Assessment Pending Trial.

[34] Lord Hanson of Flint. (2025). Border Security, Asylum and Immigration Bill Committee Day 3.

[35] Helen Bamber Foundation, ATLEU and ECPAT UK. (2025). Road to Nowhere: The impact of insecure immigration status of survivors of trafficking.

[36] Home Office. (2025). Immigration Rules Appendix Temporary Permission to Stay for Victims of Human Trafficking or Slavery.

[37] Duncan Lewis. (2024). Duncan Lewis Challenges Unlawful Trafficking Policy on Behalf of Multiple Clients.

[38] Home Office. (2025). Temporary permission to stay for victims of human trafficking and slavery: caseworker guidance.

[39] Helen Bamber Foundation, ATLEU and ECPAT UK. (2025). Road to Nowhere: The impact of insecure immigration status of survivors of trafficking.

on to state that: "In the case of children, the child's best interests take precedence over the above two requirements (personal situation and cooperation with authorities)".[40] The words 'when legally necessary' have been introduced in order to take into account the fact that certain states do not require a residence permit for children. Despite this, the UK framework does not provide a tailored immigration route for child victims of trafficking. Children are only eligible for temporary permission to stay under the same restrictive criteria as adults, and may still be refused if recovery or participation in proceedings is considered possible in their country of origin.

This failure to operationalise the "best interests of the child" principle in immigration decision-making leaves trafficked children in a state of legal and emotional precarity: without secure status, without consistent access to recovery support, and at risk of missing and re-trafficking.

Age Determinations

Unaccompanied children seeking asylum in the UK often lack official identity documents such as passports or birth certificates. For some, these documents have never existed, while for others they may have been lost, destroyed, confiscated, or replaced with false papers during their journeys. For some children who do have this evidence it may not be requested, or it may be dismissed at the border. As a result, they may be treated as adults or their stated age is disputed by the Home Office. Age determinations remain one of the most contested and distressing issues affecting unaccompanied children in the UK.[41] The question of a child's age has serious implications for their safety, entitlements, and access to protection. Misclassification can lead to children being placed in inappropriate accommodation, denied vital support, or treated as adults within immigration and criminal justice systems. For those who are child trafficking victims it may also significantly increase the risk of them going missing or being re-trafficked.[42]

Our previous research has highlighted the fear and trauma associated with age disputes. Heading Back to Harm documented the links between missing and wrongful age determinations or protracted age procedures. International law recognises the particular vulnerabilities of trafficked children in age disputes. Article 10(3) of the Council of Europe Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings (ECAT) requires states to give the benefit of the doubt when age is uncertain, affording a presumed minority until verification is complete.

Domestic legislation includes similar safeguards. The Modern Slavery Act 2015 (England and Wales) includes an explicit "presumption of age" clause, requiring that if there are reasonable ground to believe the person is trafficked and there is doubt, the individual is treated as a child unless proven otherwise. The purpose of legislators drafting the directive was to secure immediate protection and ensure child-specific support is given.[43] However, in practice, it does not provide adequate protection as it relies on both effective identification of a child as a potential victim and the benefit of the doubt being given.

[40] Explanatory Report to the Council of Europe Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings. Paragraph 186.

[41] Helen Bamber Foundation, Humans for Rights Network, and Refugee Council. (2024). Forced Adulthood: The Home Office's incorrect determination of age and how this leaves child refugees at risk.

[42] Ayeb-Karlsson, et al. (2024). Behind Closed Doors: A Storytelling Legal and Empirical Analysis of Human Trafficking Risks in Home Office Hotels Compared to Other Accommodation for Unaccompanied Children and Young People Seeking Asylum in the UK.

[43] *Modern Slavery Act* 2015. Section 51. Explanatory Notes.

This is particularly the case with Home Office determinations where an immigration official encounters a young person claiming to be under 18. In these circumstances three outcomes are possible:

1. to accept the claimed age;
2. to dispute it, in which case the child is referred to the local authority as an "age-disputed child", or;
3. to determine that the individual's appearance and demeanour "very strongly suggest" they are over 18, leading to them being treated as an adult.

Where a referral is made using option 2, local authority social workers have the responsibility for assessing age, guided by statutory and case law safeguards. Department for Education guidance is clear that age assessments should only take place where there is reason to doubt the claimed age, and should not be a routine process.

However, children deemed to be adults by the Home Office using option 3, are not referred for further assessment. Instead, they are arbitrarily assigned a date of birth, placed in adult asylum accommodation or immigration detention, and excluded from children's services and access to an Independent Child Trafficking Guardian (ICTG).[44] Local authorities are not informed of their presence, leaving these children reliant on chance encounters with charities or hotel staff to seek help. The government does not publish disaggregated data on the numbers of children treated as adults at the border, nor does it track their outcomes, creating an accountability and safeguarding gap. Figures obtained by the Helen Bamber Foundation found that over an 18-month period, more than 1,300 children were wrongly assessed as adults by the Home Office.[45] In the first six months of 2024 alone, over 250 children were misclassified and treated as adults.[46] Many of these children were later confirmed through local authority assessments to be under 18. Such misclassification leaves children, including child trafficking victims, at high level of risk including going missing and re-trafficking.

Children's Social Care and Accommodation

In recent years, the government introduced new accommodation standards through secondary legislation[47] in England. Since September 2021, local authorities have been required to ensure that all looked-after children under 16 are placed in settings that provide care. However, these protections do not extend to 16- and 17-year-olds, who can still be housed in so-called "supported accommodation" that does not provide day-to-day care. The Government also introduced new regulations setting out that providers must now register with Ofsted. However, they allow in exceptional circumstances for unsuitable placements to continue, including hostels, caravans, tents, boats, or shared housing with unrelated adults.[48] Through guidance, such "mobile" or "non-permanent" settings have, for the first time, been formally recognised as legitimate placements for older children.[49] This effectively legitimises a two-tier care system, where some children are placed in settings that fail to meet even the most basic

[44] Home Office. (2024). Interim guidance for independent child trafficking guardians. Par. 79.

[45] Refugee and Migrant Children's Consortium. (2025). Lost Childhoods: The consequences of flaw age assessments at the UK Border.

[46] *Ibid.*

[47] Care Planning, Placement and Case Review (England) (Amendment) Regulations 2021

[48] The Supported Accommodation (England) Regulations 2023

[49] Department for Education. (2023). Guide to the Supported Accommodation Regulations including Quality Standards.

standards of safety and stability.

This system disproportionately affects unaccompanied asylum-seeking and trafficked children, many of whom go missing shortly after entering their care placement. Local authorities face unprecedented financial strain, with some recent commitments of funding announced to provide £555m to deliver children's social care reforms and £560 million to refurbish and expand children's homes, which is welcome.[50] As a result, unaccompanied children are frequently housed in the settings, further increasing their vulnerability to going missing or being re-exploited.[51]

The Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill introduced an extension of corporate parenting responsibilities, a move welcomed by care leavers. However, the Bill includes a significant exemption for immigration, nationality, and customs functions, effectively excluding non-British children from equal protection. Historically, children's legislation and social care principles have been universal in their application; this carve-out therefore sets a concerning precedent, undermining the universality of child safeguarding.

Currently, around 9% of all children in care in England are unaccompanied asylum-seeking children, with many more affected by immigration functions across the UK.[52] Yet, the ongoing creation of a two-tier care system driven by both limited social care funding, accommodation policy and immigration exceptions risks entrenching inequality and placing some of the most vulnerable children at continued risk of harm.

Conclusion

Once again this research has shown that unaccompanied and trafficked children remain at high risk of going missing from care in the UK. This has been a persistent finding over the last decade, showing a continuing and significant failure in safeguarding these children, many of whom face significant risks and vulnerabilities. Many systems and processes in force in the UK currently appear to be exacerbating this risk, with little meaningful consideration of, or ability to, provide care and safety for these children.

[50] Sanford, M. (2025). Local authority financial resilience; HM Treasury. (2025). Spending Review 2025.

[51] Missing People and ECPAT UK. (2016). Heading Back to Harm.

[52] Department for Education. (2024). Children looked after in England including adoptions.

Recommendations

Missing specific recommendations

This research continues to evidence that unaccompanied asylum seeking children and trafficked children are at very high risk of going missing from care. It is crucial that local authority children's services recognise these risks when a child first arrives in the UK, when a child first comes into care, or where a placement move happens.

1. Local authorities children's services, and UK police forces, should ensure that good practice in supporting trafficked and unaccompanied children who arrive in the UK and are risk of going missing is followed, with a focus on preventing children from going missing and ensuring a better response when missing and on their return.[53]
2. The Department for Education should ensure all trafficked and unaccompanied children can access appropriate accommodation that provides care and takes into account the specific risks to missing and exploitation.

Wider recommendations

We know from previous research, much of which is summarised above, that elements of the current response to unaccompanied and trafficked children can increase the risk of missing for these children. The below recommendations relate to the wider systems that are often involved for these children.

3. The Home Office should ensure timely roll out of the devolved decision making pilot to all local authority areas across the UK and that all children within those areas have their cases decided by the panels including those within 100 days of their 18th birthday, age disputed children and those subject to a public order disqualification.
4. The Home Office should remove the requirement to provide 'objective evidence' for children at such an early stage in the NRM.
5. The Home Office should repeal the Public Order Disqualification provisions in the Nationality and Borders Act 2022.
6. The Home Office should provide confirmed child victims of modern slavery subject to immigration control with leave to remain of at least 5 years with a route to settlement.
7. The Home Office should ensure age determinations only treat someone claiming to be a child as an adult in exceptional circumstances.
8. The Home Office should provide young people determined to be adults by the Home Office who challenge their age with access to an independent child trafficking guardian (ICTG) until their age determination process is otherwise concluded.
9. The Home Office should remove the exemption of immigration and nationality functions in the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill to ensure all young care leavers can benefit from the extension of corporate parenting responsibilities.

[53] For more detail about good practice, please see: Missing People and The Children's Society. (2024). Good Practice Guidance: Supporting unaccompanied children who arrive in the UK and are at risk of going missing.

Annexe

Annex: Freedom of Information Request

August 2025

To Whom it May Concern,

I am writing to make an open government request for all the information to which I am entitled under the Freedom of Information Act 2000.

Please release the following information relating to looked after children in the care of your authority for the period 1 January 2024 to 31 December 2024.

1. **The total number of looked after children in the care of your authority that are:**
   a. Identified as having been trafficked or a victim of modern slavery – including, but not limited to those identified through the National Referral Mechanism.
   b. Suspected of having been a victim of trafficking or modern slavery[54], if not included in a.
   c. Identified as an unaccompanied asylum-seeking child (UASC) or a separated child[55]
   d. Identified as an unaccompanied asylum-seeking child (UASC) or a separated child who have also been identified or suspected of having been a victim of trafficking or modern slavery.

2. **The total number of looked after children in the care of your authority:**
   a. Identified or suspected as having been trafficked/victim of modern slavery and that have gone missing or absent.
   b. Identified as an UASC or separated child and that have gone missing or absent.
   c. Identified as an unaccompanied asylum-seeking child (UASC) or a separated child who have also been identified or suspected of having been a victim of trafficking or modern slavery, and that have gone missing or absent.

3. **The total number of individual incidents (which could involve the same child on more than one occasion) of looked after children in the care of your authority:**
   a. Identified or suspected as having been trafficked/victim of modern slavery and that have gone missing or absent.
   b. Identified as an UASC or separated child and that have gone missing or absent.

[54] i) Trafficking is defined in Article 4 of the Council of Europe Convention Against Trafficking in Human Beings as *"the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation."* However, for the purposes of trafficking in the case of a child there is no requirement to meet the 'means' component within that definition as a child is not able to give informed consent. Therefore, any child who is recruited, transported, transferred, harboured or received for the purposes of exploitation is considered to be a trafficking victim, whether or not they have been forced or deceived.

ii) 'Modern slavery' includes human trafficking, slavery, servitude and forced or compulsory labour for the purpose of exploitation.

[55] "Separated children" are children, as defined in article 1 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, who have been separated from both parents, or from their previous legal or customary primary caregiver, but not necessarily from other relatives. These may, therefore, include children accompanied by other adult family members.

4. **The total number of looked after children in the care of your authority that are still missing or absent (including those that subsequently turned 18 without being found) that were identified or suspected as having been trafficked**

5. **The total number of looked after children in the care of your authority that are still missing or absent (including those that subsequently turned 18 without being found) that were identified as an UASC or separated child.**

6. **For questions 1a, 1b and 2a please provide a breakdown of these numbers by year and whether the child is British or non-British.**

7. **For question 2, please provide a breakdown of these numbers by type of accommodation missing from**

Please note that statutory duties include collecting and recording the following:

- Whether a child is a victim of trafficking/modern slavery, or whether there is reason to believe they may be a victim[56]
- Whether a child is an unaccompanied asylum-seeking child (UASC)[57]
- Data on children reported missing from care[58]

I would be grateful if you could contact me if there are any issues regarding this request as I understand that under the Act, you are required to advise and assist requesters. If any of this information is already in the public domain, please can you direct me to it, with page references and URLs.

I understand that you are required to respond to my request within 20 working days after you receive this letter. I would be grateful if you could confirm that you have received this request.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Missing People and ECPAT UK

[56] The Care Planning and Care Leavers (Amendment) Regulations 2014; Home Office: 'National Referral Mechanism: Guidance for Child First Responders'.

[57] *Ibid.*

[58] Department for Education. (2014). Statutory guidance on children who run away or go missing from home or care.

Every Child Protected Against Trafficking

Registered charity in England and Wales (1020419) and in Scotland (SC047419)

A lifeline when someone disappears

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