



Greater Manchester
IMMIGRATION AID UNIT

“This system destroys you”:
Children trapped in adult
asylum hotels by the Home
Office

JULY 2025

TABLE OF CONTENTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY 3

OUR KEY RECOMMENDATIONS 5

INTRODUCTION 6

THE DATA 11

“THEY DESTROY YOU, THE HOTEL”: CHILDREN’S LIVES IN HOTELS 13

WHY ARE CHILDREN IN HOTELS? 23

“NO ONE LISTENED TO ME”: GETTING OUT OF THE HOTEL 34

“THEY DON’T BELIEVE YOU HERE”: CONCLUSION 43

RECOMMENDATIONS 45

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

“You can’t stop feeling sad. You have to feel sad and angry when someone says you are a liar. It is in your heart.”

Over recent years, thousands of children have been wrongly treated as adults by the Home Office. These children are in the UK on their own seeking asylum. Following decisions made by UK border officials that they are “significantly over 18” they have been sent alone to adult asylum accommodation, usually hotels. This is a report about children housed in adult hotels after these decisions at the border, based on Greater Manchester Immigration Aid Unit’s legal and place-based expertise and experience, and on the experiences that the children we work with have shared.

“I feel like I am going to die. It is a very bad life in the hotel.”

Between January 2024 and February 2025, **at least 296 children were wrongly sent to adult asylum accommodation, usually hotels, in the North West.** This is a report about what children experience in asylum hotels, how they are sent there, and the support they need to get out.

We are sounding the alarm – as others have done before us – that these children are being put at significant risk. Much harm has already been done, and must be acknowledged; and the government, local authorities and accommodation providers must act now to prevent further harm.

IN THIS REPORT

“THEY DESTROY YOU, THE HOTEL”: CHILDREN’S LIVES IN HOTELS

We share children’s experiences of life in adult asylum hotels in the North West. They told us that:

- They did not feel safe living amongst unknown adults.
- They experienced mental health crisis, including suicidal thoughts, loneliness and isolation.
- They were worried about their nutrition due to the poor standards of food in hotels.
- The staff at the hotels were sometimes unkind and unhelpful.

“THEY GET ANGRY, THEY GET HOSTILE”: WHY ARE CHILDREN IN HOTELS?

We look at the interrogations at the border on arrival into the UK that lead to children being placed in adult accommodation. We talked to children about:

- Border officials’ reasons for disputing their claimed age: often, this was based on unreliable factors.
- Inconsistent practice in relation to children either having or not having documents proving their age.

- The fact that these interactions often take place without giving children any time to rest after exhausting and dangerous journeys to the UK.
- Reports of intimidating and aggressive behaviour by border officials.

“NO ONE LISTENED TO ME”: GETTING OUT OF THE HOTEL

All of the children we spoke to eventually found some support, adults who listen to them and believe them. But for some, it took many months. We spoke about:

- The delays in getting referred to a local authority, due to hotel staff not taking the necessary action.
- The National Age Assessment Board (NAAB) assessments that some children were subjected to.

OUR KEY RECOMMENDATION

The Home Office must acknowledge that their current practices mean children are being wrongly assessed as adults at the UK border and sent to live in adult accommodation.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE HOME OFFICE

Accept that current practice is sending children to adult hotels. Take the necessary action:

- Immediately suspend any “significantly over 18 decisions” at the border pending an investigation.
- Repeal the changes to the age assessment process introduced in the Nationality and Borders Act (2022), including the introduction of the National Age Assessment Board and the attempt to use “scientific” methods to assess age.
- End the for-profit model of asylum accommodation.

While these changes are being made:

- Notify relevant local authorities when people who have said they are children are being sent into hotels in their area.
- Improve published statistics on age disputes.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO ACCOMODATION PROVIDERS

- Immediately refer to the local authority when staff become aware that a potential child is in adult asylum accommodation.
- Take all possible measures to safeguard potential children.
- Update training for hotel staff so they are aware of the high likelihood of children being treated as adults.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO LOCAL AUTHORITIES

- Ensure social workers' decisions and training include an understanding of the child's experience in the UK, including being traumatised by Home Office age assessment practice.
- Ensure that potential children are not held to higher thresholds in assessments when local authority capacity is stretched.
- Do not refer children to the National Age Assessment Board (NAAB).

INTRODUCTION

Greater Manchester Immigration Aid Unit is a voluntary organisation supporting people subject to immigration control for over 35 years. We offer free legal immigration advice, representation and support services, concentrating on nationality, asylum, and human rights, with specific support services for children and vulnerable adults. Our advocacy and campaigning work is led by and with people with lived experience of immigration control. We run a weekly youth group for separated children seeking asylum, which is open to children whose ages have been disputed.

WHAT ARE ASYLUM HOTELS?

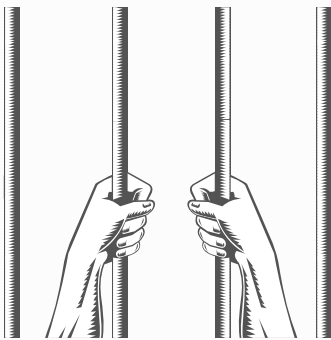
The Home Office accommodates adults who are seeking asylum while they wait for their claim to be decided. Prior to 2020, people would sometimes spend a few days or weeks in a hotel before being “dispersed” to other accommodation, often multiple occupancy houses. Once someone receives a positive decision on their asylum claim, they can move into mainstream accommodation, which could be social housing or private rented accommodation.

But during the Covid-19 pandemic and the previous government, a huge backlog of asylum claims built up, which disrupted the demand for and supply of asylum accommodation. **The use of hotels to house people for long periods – months and even years – became mainstream.**



According to Home Office statistics, **38,079 people** were living in asylum hotels at the end of 2024. 4,252 of those were in the North West. Some hotels house families and women, while some are “all male”, housing only men who have arrived in the UK alone. **Room sharing in all-male hotels is mandatory.**

Asylum accommodation is run for profit, contracted by the Home Office to private providers. This means that staff working in asylum hotels are not directly employed by the Home Office, but private companies, often a chain of subcontractors, each with their own policies. **Accountability is obscured by these structures**, and people experience being passed from pillar to post, sent to different agencies and helplines, when looking for support.



At GMIAU we support a group of adults living in asylum hotels to talk about their experiences. They tell us that **it is more like living in a prison than a home**. We have documented concerns with food, conditions, surveillance, and the length of time spent in hotels. **Hotels are not a suitable place for anyone to live long-term.**

WHO ARE THE CHILDREN WE SPOKE TO?

Children under the age of 18, who arrive in the UK to seek asylum on their own, should be routed into a different system to adults and families. There are separate processes for unaccompanied children, both in asylum decision-making and in the provision of accommodation and support.

Unaccompanied children who arrive at the UK border are sent to local authorities through the **National Transfer Scheme** (NTS), where they are looked after by children's services – as is their right as children. In the North West, unaccompanied children may have arrived through the NTS or may have arrived in the area spontaneously. But increasing numbers of children are arriving in our local areas by being placed in adult hotels.

The children we spoke to are from a variety of countries, with vastly different experiences before coming to the UK. A number of the children have been victims of trafficking and have experienced exploitation on their journey to the UK. **All of them were told at the UK border that their age was not believed and that they would be treated as an adult.** All of them were sent to adult asylum hotels in the North West of England, the majority in Greater Manchester.

CONTEXT IN THE NORTH WEST

GMIAU is the only not-for-profit provider of specialist legal immigration advice in the North West of England. This report is written from our perspective as a place-based organisation working directly with children and young people seeking asylum, and with people living in asylum hotels in Greater Manchester. We work closely with statutory partners, frontline service organisations and lived experience campaigners to develop solutions to immigration injustice in Greater Manchester. **We are an expert voice locally and nationally on navigating the age assessment process.**

Our local context includes:

- **The North West houses the highest number of people seeking asylum out of any region of the country** (19% of the UK's asylum-seeking population). As well as people being sent to the North West by the Home Office, the strong transport links and settled communities in our cities mean many people make their own way here.



- Asylum accommodation across the North West includes **22 asylum hotels**, as well as **dispersal accommodation**, at the time of writing.
- The **North West also has the biggest immigration and asylum legal aid deficit in the country** – the biggest difference between the need for legal aid immigration advice and the availability.
- Local authorities we work with tell us that their **capacity is being stretched thin** by the amount of referrals they receive for children in adult asylum hotels to be assessed by children's services. **Social workers say they are concerned about how many "clear and obvious" children are being placed in hotels.**

As well as challenges, we have specific strengths in the North West, which include **local commitments made to people seeking asylum and to children and young people.**

- Several of our local authorities have committed to being Local Authorities of Sanctuary, and Liverpool and Manchester are working towards being UNICEF-recognised Child Friendly Cities.
- In Greater Manchester, the Children and Young People's Plan has promised that our city-region will be a place “where all children have the best start in life and young people grow up inspired”.

This report is a **call to action**, on a **national** level, but also in a **local** context, to ensure that these commitments can become a reality for **every child** who finds themselves in our region.

STRUCTURE OF THIS REPORT

- 1 The first section looks at children's lives in hotels in the North West. This is the point at which children may first come into contact with us at GMIAU.
- 2 The second section explains how they got there: the processes at the border that lead to being wrongly treated as an adult, and how children experience them.
- 3 The third section looks at the struggles children face getting out of hotels and getting the support they are entitled to, including further barriers in the form of the National Age Assessment Board.
- 4 The report ends with what children want decision-makers to know, and our recommendations for the Home Office, accommodation providers and local authorities.

RELEVANT GUIDANCE

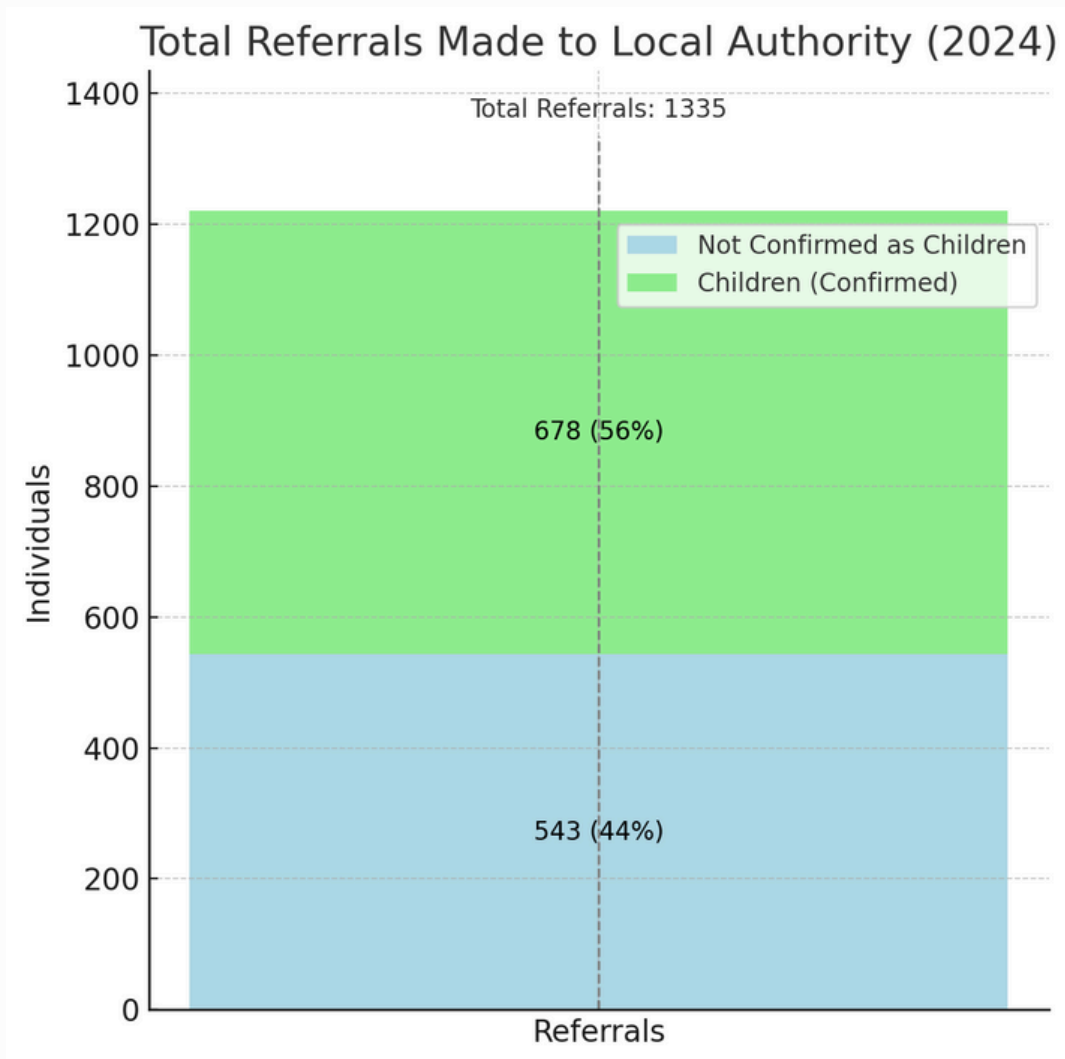
- Care of unaccompanied migrant children, 2017
- Association of Directors of Children's Services Age Assessment Guidance, 2015
 - This guidance is due to be updated but has not been at the time of publication.
- Working together to safeguard children, 2023
- Assessing Age, updated June 2025
- Other relevant legislation includes Section 55 of the Borders, Citizenship and Immigration Act 2009, which places a duty on the Home Secretary to consider "the need to safeguard and promote the welfare of children who are in the United Kingdom" when discharging immigration functions.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

We would like to thank the children and young people who gave their time to share their stories for this report. We know that the injustices they have faced in the UK were difficult to talk about, especially for those children who were still in asylum hotels, being treated as adults. We are grateful to them for choosing to courageously speak out for the sake of the children who will come after them, and we wish them all the best for the future.

THE DATA

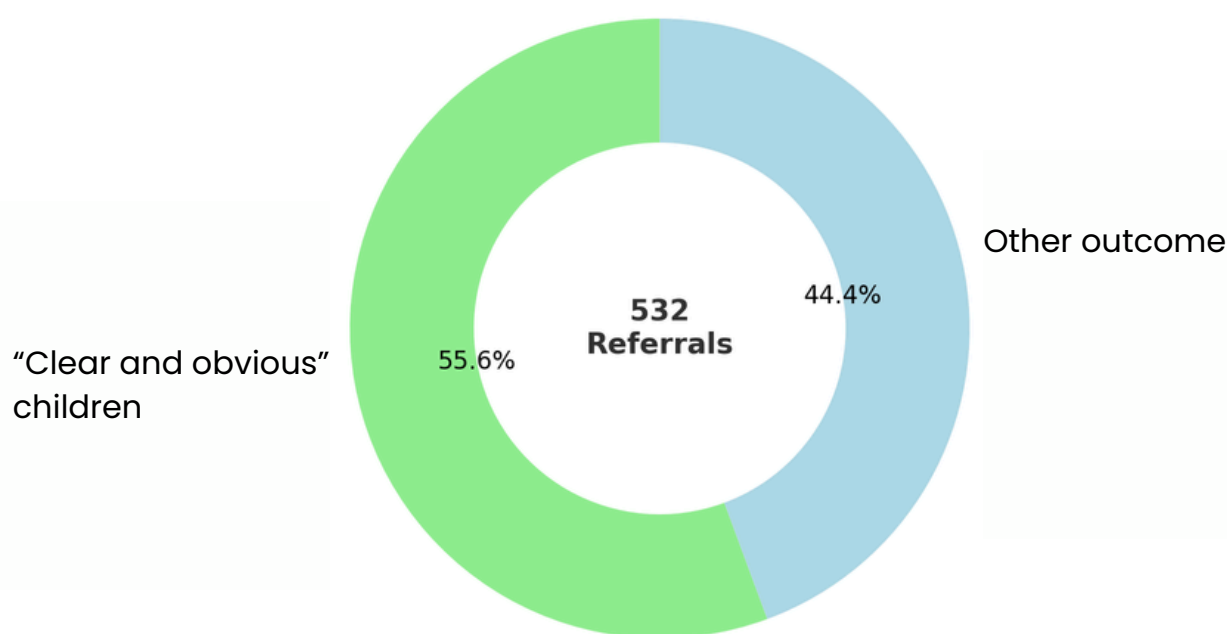
Data collected by the Helen Bamber Foundation found that in 2024, 90 local authorities received **1,335** referrals of potential children in adult accommodation. Of the cases when a decision on age was made/age assessment concluded (1,221), 678 individuals – **56% - were found to be children.**



The Helen Bamber Foundation has collected this data through Freedom of Information (FOI) Act requests for a **number of years** and has **consistently found a failure rate of well over 50% in Home Office age decisions at the border - as high as 63% in 2022.**

Statistics we have seen from 6 local authorities in the North West shows our region reflects the national trend: between January 2024 and February 2025, of 532 referrals to 6 North West local authorities, 296 were found to be **“clear and obvious children”** without a further assessment necessary (56%) following a brief inquiry carried out by the local authorities.

North West Referrals (Jan 2024 - Feb 2025)



Note on data. Some of the reported number (296) of children in the North West are not included in the 2024 national figure, partly because the data reported in the North West goes up to February 2025, and partly because not every local authority responded to the Helen Bamber Foundation's FOI requests. We know that **the true number of children wrongly placed in adult accommodation is likely to be higher than the data shows**, and that **not every child will have found help and been referred to a local authority.**

“THEY DESTROY YOU, THE HOTEL”: CHILDREN’S LIVES IN HOTELS

“Everything is difficult in the hotel, everything.”

“They destroy you, the hotel.”

“Life in the hotel is miserable.”

The children we spoke to had spent months in adult asylum hotels, **frightened** and **alone**. They told us they were worried about their **physical safety**, the deterioration of their **mental health**, their **nutrition**, and that they were **unable to find the support** they needed.

CONTEXT

- Data collected by charities and local authorities makes clear that when someone identifies themselves as a child in adult accommodation, **it is more likely than not that they will be found to be a child.**
- Government guidance states that hotel or bed and breakfast style accommodation **“is not suitable for any child**, even on an emergency accommodation basis. Such accommodation can leave the child particularly vulnerable to risk from those who wish to exploit them and does not cater for their protection or welfare needs.”
- We know that children seeking asylum who are placed in hotels are at risk of going missing and of exploitation, and that children have lost their lives after having their ages disbelieved.

- Often, government arguments for harsher age assessments focus on the “risk” that a young adult may be looked after in supervised children’s accommodation settings, and the implications that adults may pretend to be children for nefarious reasons. This is not a situation we have come across at GMIAU, while we have come across significant numbers of children who are at significant risk in adult hotels. Most older teenagers seeking asylum are not placed in foster care or children’s homes with younger children, but in semi independent or independent accommodation.

This is what young people told us about their experiences living in asylum hotels.

“I WAS SO SCARED”: STAYING SAFE

We want to reiterate that hotels are not a safe or suitable way for anyone to be accommodated for anything more than short-term emergencies. In addition to the children we work with who have been wrongly placed in hotels, we support a group of adult hotel residents to share their experiences and advocate for housing justice. There are many vulnerable adults and young people (who are over 18, but still young and alone), who are placed in hotels legally but struggle to survive. The toxic conditions in hotels make mental health crisis, drug use, and violence more likely.

It is in this context that children told us it was impossible to feel safe as a child living among unknown adults. Some witnessed fights and violence, and one described his roommates smoking cannabis. These problems stem from the conditions in hotels that people are forced to live in for months and years.

“I didn’t feel safe in the hotel.”

“I spent 7 months there. I’ve been with adults, they were taking my food, I couldn’t talk to them or defend myself. I was so scared of them.”

“Sometimes one guy fights with me.”

“There were lots of people staying there, lots of rooms. There were lots of men. Everyone seemed older than me.”

“I had an incident in the hotel. Someone was drunk and they asked me for food. When I said no, they hit me. Someone had to intervene. The staff just told him to close the door. I felt very bad. I’m angry and emotional.”

“They (the adults) stole my food. I couldn’t talk.”

“I had an adult that I share the room with. When I go to the toilet or shower **I don’t feel safe.”**

“There is no language to talk to someone, to defend yourself.”

“They [adults] ask for bad things. You feel like you can’t say no – how can you say no?”

In contrast, children also told us that sometimes, the only person who helped them was an adult in the hotel who spoke their language. In one instance, a member of GMIAU’s hotel residents’ group, having met a child in his hotel and not knowing how to find him support, brought him to the group to ask for help.

Further risks to children’s safety come from outside the hotels. During the racist riots in the summer of 2024, asylum hotels in our area were targeted and set on fire. There are ongoing far right protests and harassment of residents outside hotels in Greater Manchester on a regular basis. Children, who should not be living in these hotels at all, may come to real physical and psychological harm if targeted by far right activists.



"I FEEL LIKE I AM GOING TO DIE": MENTAL HEALTH CRISIS

At GMIAU, we have supported a number of children who have struggled with suicidal ideation and self-harm due to being in adult accommodation. We cannot overstate the danger we are seeing children in. Without a serious overhaul of the current system, it feels like an inevitability that children in Greater Manchester will take their own lives as a direct consequence of being in adult hotels.

Children described their mental state while living in hotels:

"I feel like I am going to die. It is a very bad life in the hotel."

"These days I can't sleep, I'm under stress, they don't care."

"I feel low, tearful, and missing my family. I feel isolated: there are only adults, not friends."

"It's not easy to live in hotel. Sometimes I feel stressed, I can't concentrate at college. It's hard to learn English when I am stressed."

"I became ill in there, physically and mentally."

In addition to the day-to-day struggle of living in an adult hotel, children feel strongly the injustice of not being believed. They told us this was impacting their mental health too.

"You can't stop feeling sad. You have to feel sad and angry when someone says you are a liar. It is in your heart."

"You left everything to come here, your families and home, to have safety, but they make you feel lonely."

"They encourage us to commit suicide, because they don't explain the system, what we're doing there."

Loneliness was a feeling that came up again and again. While the Home Office had determined them to be adults, the children said that it was all too clear to other hotel residents that their age made them different. This made it hard to make vital connections. GMIAU's All4One youth group is often the only lifeline to children being treated as adults: one said **"I've been in my room the whole week, I was scared to go out, except on Wednesday, I went to (the All4One group)."** Often where there is more than one child in a hotel, they find and support each other.

"Everyone I talked to, they said how old are you, I said 16, they left me and go because I'm a child."

"I was living on my own feeling lost."

"I feel lonely in there, stay often indoors."

"There with adult people, it's difficult to make friends, you are alone."

"It doesn't feel comfortable to share with adults because they are different. They see you are a problem."

"I wanted to play games, but I can't."

"It was lonely as there was no one my age. I wish I could find someone my age."

"Everyone had to go and get food together. This made me feel scared and uncomfortable around all these strange older people."

EXPLOITATION

Loneliness and isolation are key indicators children are at risk of exploitation. Between 2021 and 2024, the Home Office ran seven hotels for children. Unlike the age disputed children this report focuses on, these were children whose ages were accepted, but who the Home Office had taken the responsibility to accommodate.

Over **400 children went missing** from these hotels. Their use was only stopped after it was deemed unlawful. Research by ECPAT and UCL found that placing children in hotels increased their risk of trafficking and exploitation. Children who went missing from these Home Office hotels were later found being **exploited** in Manchester.

It is in the interest of adults seeking to exploit children for children to be in adult accommodation without the appropriate safeguarding. Hotels are particularly risky, given that they are often in known and visible locations which may be known to gangs and traffickers. If children are unable to make friends of their own age, and do not have safe adults who they can trust, they may find unknown adults to support them, who could seek to exploit them.





“THEY HAVE TO LOOK AT OUR NUTRITION”: FOOD IN HOTELS

Concerns about the quality of food in asylum hotels have been well documented. People have little choice over the food they eat given that they are given only £8.86 per week in financial support. They report poor quality, unhealthy food, and parents living in hotels with their children said they were spending their tiny asylum support allowance on more nutritional food for their children. Please see GMIAU’s [2023 blog](#) and Greater Manchester Asylum Hotels Group’s [2025 response](#) to the Home Affairs Select Committee’s inquiry into asylum accommodation.

We are concerned about the impact poor quality food could have on children living in hotels, specifically their physical health and nutrition, as well as the knock-on impact on their mental health.

Separated children may have already had poor nutrition on their journey to the UK, travelling without a parent or care giver. That there is sometime conflict over food, as described on p. 15, makes it more likely children may not be being properly fed.

Children said:

“Considering that (they know that) we might be children, they have to look at our nutrition.”

“I had a blood test, I had vitamin deficiency. They couldn’t get blood from me; I told her I hadn’t had any food.”

“IT MADE ME CRY”: BEHAVIOR OF HOTEL STAFF

Children raised concerns about the behavior of staff towards them in hotels. Again, this is not an issue exclusive to children: reports of careless, neglectful and sometimes abusive staff behaviour have been raised by the adult hotel residents we work with. Their experience is that staff are there to control, not to care. In 2023, our [blog on hotel staff and surveillance](#) highlighted that job advertisements for hotel staff included the warning **“these roles are not for the faint-hearted”** and said **“no experience required”**.

Unsurprisingly, staff are also not required to have any training, qualification or experience relating to working with separated children. Their reported lack of care is even more concerning when the stakes are as high as they are for age disputed children, who need help to be identified and referred to a local authority to get the support they are entitled to.

“They were intimidating me, asking me why I don’t know how to speak English.”

“They don’t help. They sit there talking together and sitting on their computer.”

“The staff are looking at me like I am a liar (because of the age dispute). **They laugh at me. It made me cry.”**

“I told them I had a stomach ache, I couldn’t sleep, I was really in pain. They said what can I do?”

“They don’t do anything to help with my mental health. I had to use google to find help in an emergency.”

“I told them I didn’t feel well, they said sit down.”

Negative behavior from the staff in hotels further solidifies children’s feelings that they are not cared about in the UK, and makes it more likely that they will come to the attention of unsafe adults.

SUMMARY: CHILDREN’S LIVES IN HOTELS

Children are at **significant risk of harm** when they are housed in adult hotels. They are scared when placed with unknown adults, who themselves may be struggling with the toxic conditions of asylum accommodation. There is not the appropriate support or safeguarding for separated children available and the staff, far from caring for children, often worsen the situation. We believe children will come to further harm and potentially lose their lives because they are being placed in adult hotels. The following section explains how they got there.

WHY ARE CHILDREN IN HOTELS?

“THEY GET ANGRY, THEY GET HOSTILE”: INTERROGATIONS AT THE BORDER

This section is about what happens when a child’s age is disputed at the border, and on what basis these decisions are made. We want to spotlight this process for two reasons:

1 It is directly leading to children being placed in adult hotels and all the subsequent safeguarding crises detailed above. The failure rate of these decisions is consistently documented as well above 50% (Helen Bamber Foundation). The Home Office must be held to account for the harm they are doing, during these interactions and as a result of them.

2 We are concerned that once a child is placed in adult accommodation, because the Home Office have determined them to be “significantly over 18”, professionals and agencies are less likely to believe their age. We hope to highlight the weak basis of these decisions. Being interrogated by hostile border officials should be understood as one of the traumatising experiences a child may have had on their journey to and through the UK.

WHAT SHOULD HAPPEN

When unaccompanied children arrive in the UK to claim asylum, local authorities have a **legal duty** to look after them. For children whose ages are accepted on arrival, they are either sent to local authorities across the country or arrive there themselves, where they are looked after by children’s services.



Age assessments should not be routine.

According to guidance, if they need to be completed, they should be holistic, and should not be solely based on physical appearance. Full age assessments which comply with case law are described as “Merton-compliant” (see Merton case). In Merton-compliant assessments, evidence from adults who know the child should be taken into account.

When children arrive at the border after traumatic journeys, the effects of this journey on their appearance should be considered. Age assessment guidance says “it is important (particularly for presenting borderline cases) that children and young people be provided with the **time** and **support** they need to **recover** from their journeys before they are required to participate in an age assessment.”

WHAT IS HAPPENING

As we have seen, a large number of children arriving at the border are sent to adult accommodation instead of to a local authority to be looked after. This is because they have faced a **brief “assessment”** by Home Office officials on arrival at the border and have been determined to be “significantly over 18”, based on the officials’ opinion of their “physical appearance and demeanour”.



These officers are not trained social workers and have **no qualification** or **expertise** in assessing age. Their decisions directly contradict established guidance on assessing age, with a heavy weighting towards appearance. Children also reported inconsistent treatment regarding documents, not being given the opportunity to recover from their journey, and concerning behaviour by officials.

“HE SAID YOUR SHOULDERS ARE WIDE”: PHYSICAL APPEARANCE

A 2024 report, “Good decision-making in age assessments”, found that appearance is over-relied upon in local authority age assessments and other factors are not considered enough. This overreliance on appearance is even more pronounced in “significantly over 18” decisions at the border. We asked children if they had been told why their age wasn’t believed.

“He said your shoulders are wide, from your shoulders I can see you are over 18.”

“They looked at my face and they kept saying no I must be older, I must be born in 2005, there’s no way that I was born in 2007. They were looking at my arms and they said I was very hairy so that was the reason I must be older than I said. I said I’ve been hairy since I was a baby, I was born hairy.”

“The reason they said was because of my hair, also they said because of my facial appearance as well as communication skills.”

“Immediately they told me they didn’t believe me, and the age they said was 24. They didn’t tell me the reason why they believed I was 24.”

“They said I was older because of my Adam’s apple.”

Assessments based on physical appearance and demeanor are likely to be inaccurate. According to medical experts, “the timing of puberty is extremely variable” and while some children may finish growing in their early teens, others may not finish growing until after the age of 18.

Additionally, children’s presentation varies based on their ethnicity among other factors, and comments on their size, features and body hair often have racist undertones. This is linked to adultification, a form of bias where Black children are perceived to be older and therefore treated as a threat rather than a child in need of support, in policing, child protection and safeguarding contexts.

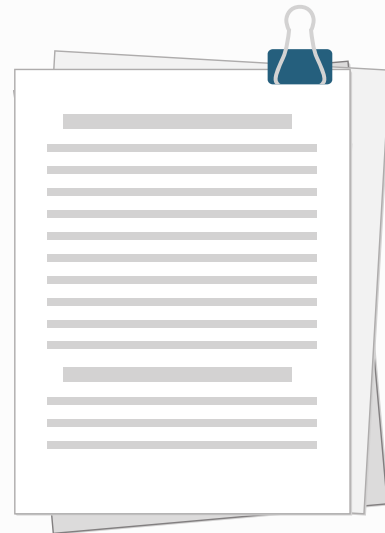
“SCIENTIFIC” AGE ASSESSMENTS

The Nationality and Borders Act (2022) made provision for the use of so-called “scientific” age assessments, including X-rays and MRIs. It also stated that refusal to consent to this kind of testing would damage a young person’s credibility in an age assessment. This has not yet been implemented: no scientific methods have been approved at the time of writing. The exploration of “scientific” or “technological” age assessment methods is something Home Office Ministers continue to rely upon in answer to questions about problems with their age assessment process.

However, there is no way of scientifically or biologically “proving” age. The Home Office’s own Interim Age Estimation Science Advisory Committee concluded that biological age assessment can be used only “to assess whether the age claimed by UASC is **possible**”, as part of a wider social work assessment. In addition, we have significant concerns about issues of consent and coercion if children are told they must submit to medical testing or be disbelieved. With these in mind, the exploration of “scientific” methods can be seen as a waste of resources and a diversion from the deep problems with Home Office age assessments.

“IF YOU DON’T HAVE DOCUMENTS, WE CAN’T BELIEVE YOU”: APPROACH TO DOCUMENTS

Several children were told that the Home Office could not accept their age because they didn’t have documentary evidence to prove it. Many children arrive in the UK without documents: some never had documents in their home country, some may not have had time to collect them if they did, or documents might have been taken by traffickers or smugglers.



Traffickers sometimes give children false documents to enable travel and may give children documents saying they are adults to allow them to travel independently, without safeguards being flagged. Given what we know about these complexities, it is not appropriate for the Home Office to disbelieve or dispute the age of every child who does not have a document. But some children were told otherwise.

“They said if you don’t have any documents, we can’t accept. I told them, if you help me, I can prove it, but they didn’t really help me.”

“I also didn’t have any documents. They don’t have them in my country. They said if you don’t have documents, we can’t believe you.”

“I told them I don’t know how to say dates; I didn’t know about dates. I just told them my mum told me I was born in 2007.”

While several children were told that if they had no documents, the Home Office could not believe their age, others told us that they had documents that the Home Office refused to look at. One child said:

“I told him you can check my birth certificate, it’s in the bag here. He said no, you can provide this certificate in the hotel. Find a solicitor to help you, but here we don’t believe you. I was really angry because he didn’t even look at my birth certificate, he didn’t give me a chance to show it.”

This child has now had his age **accepted** after a months-long ordeal.

“CAN I HAVE SOME TIME TO SLEEP FIRST”: IMPACT OF JOURNEY TO THE UK

Children who are age assessed at the border have just arrived in the UK. Most will have had long and traumatic journeys to the UK as well as traumatic experiences in their home country that caused them to leave. The Home Office’s guidance for National Age Assessment Board workers says: “With **good care** and some **recovery time**, a child and young person’s physical appearance may change dramatically within a fairly short period of time after arriving in the UK.” But, as we heard, officials at the border take the opposite approach.

“I was really tired, I’d been 15 hours in the middle of the sea. I said can I have some time to sleep first, but they said no we have to do the interview now. I was trying to focus but I couldn’t. It was unfair to have interview when I’m really really unwell coming through the sea.”

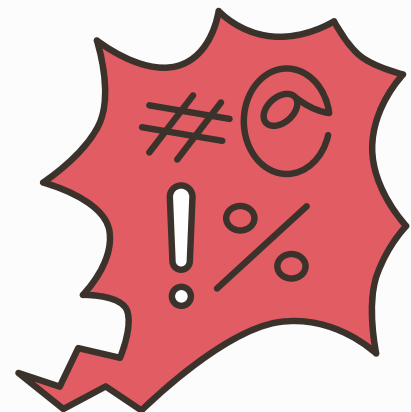
“They said (I was older) because I had spots on my face and body. I said **I’d been sleeping in the jungle for four months; I didn’t have a shower.**”

I’m giving my age, they said no it’s not your age. Why? I don’t have ID. I’m very tired, I want to sleep. I’m coming, it’s too busy in my mind, too difficult for me at this time. The interpreter is there; I told him I’m very tired. Now, remembering this time, it’s not good.”

“THEY TREAT ME LIKE A CRIMINAL”: BEHAVIOR OF BORDER OFFICIALS

The children we spoke to reported poor treatment and intimidating behaviour by the border officials in these encounters. In our [2022 report](#), a young person told us:

“They were saying bad words and not believing my age. They were laughing at me, saying you are lying.”



Three years later, our conversations with young people tell us that nothing has changed. A culture of **disbelief**, **callousness** and **cruelty** towards vulnerable young people, has if anything become more entrenched, according to the testimony we heard.

Children reported rudeness and bullying; being pressured to say they are an adult; officials refusing to view documents or continue the conversation; and persuading children to sign things they don't fully understand. They told us they were frightened and intimidated during these encounters, and did not always understand what was going on.

"They treat me like a criminal. I felt like what did I do? They rushed me to answer all the questions. I feel like at that time, this place doesn't belong to me."

"They didn't give me the opportunity to talk at all, they were just interested in what they had to say."

"They didn't treat me very well. Like they were angry, like they were cross, very rude."

"They were aggressive. When she was talking, she was speaking in an aggressive way. It made me scared. At that time I'd lost my mum, I was having mental problems."

"And they detained me – a full day in detention. I was so scared, they'd been threatening me. They said you came illegally and you will be treated differently."

"The environment looks hostile and the type of questions they were asking were intimidating. They kept asking that I should tell them my true age, despite telling them my exact age."

“I told him my age, he put down I was 24. I said no I am not, this is not okay, this is not fair. **They said you do not speak, we know how old you are, we will put this as your real age. They didn’t give me a chance to dispute my age there, they just put it was 2001. **I stopped explaining because I felt that there was no point, I was too scared.**”**

Concerningly, some children report being **pressured** to “admit” that they are a different age. Some seem to have been told this would help them get more support.

“They were saying I’d be at more advantage if I tell them my “true age”, according to them, so I should have accepted their assessment. I kind of felt pressured to just agree with their assessment.”

“They said if you’re an adult you will get support and benefits. They were trying to give me reasons to say I was an adult.”

Recently it has come to light that children are being pressured into signing a so-called **“declaration of age”** form, agreeing that they are the Home Office’s designated age, which will then be used against them when they try to access support and challenge that decision. In the above context it is clear these signatures have not been made with fully informed consent and may have been coerced.

“HOW WOULD WE KNOW?”

The children we spoke to did not understand why the Home Office was so quick to accuse them of lying. Home Office ministers have claimed that “there are incentives for adults to claim to be under 18” – whether because of how their asylum claim will be considered or getting support from social services. But both academic research and the Home Office’s own research have shown that people making irregular journeys do not have a detailed understanding of the policy environment in the UK.

We asked children if they knew before arriving in the UK that they’d be treated differently based on if they were adults or children:

“No, never, no.”

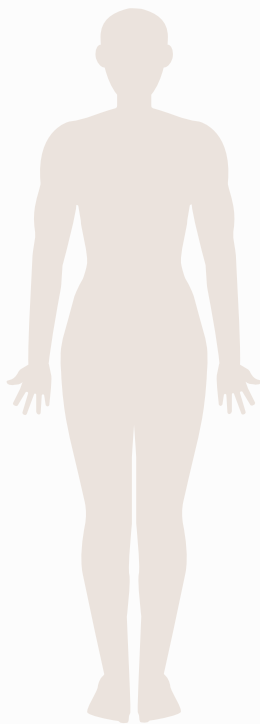
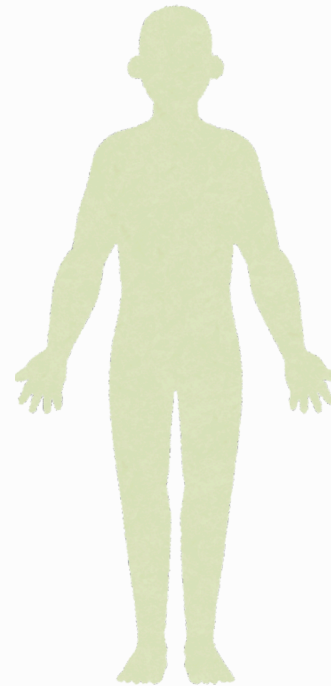
“How would we know? This country is new. We don’t know anything.”

“No, no of course I didn’t know that. It must be because the Home Office have a lot of issues and they get angry, they get hostile, they blame it on the kids. My age is my age, I’m not lying about it.”

“No, I was unaware, I didn’t know how the government would treat a child or an adult. **Still now, I still don’t know all of my rights here.”**

SUMMARY: INTERROGATIONS AT THE BORDER

These accounts evidence that vulnerable children who arrive on our shores are being intimidated and bullied by government officials who hold significant power over their future life in the UK, and who have a legal duty to safeguard their welfare. The methods of assessment they use, focusing on **physical appearance**, are known to be unreliable and based on racial prejudice.



This is in the context of the **severe consequences** for children being wrongly treated as adults, including mental health crisis and exploitation; and in the context that the failure rate of these encounters has been consistently documented as well over 50%. Still, these decisions are relied on when children attempt to dispute their age and access the support they are entitled to. The next section explains what happens when children try to get out of hotels.

“NO ONE LISTENED TO ME”: GETTING OUT OF THE HOTEL

At GMIAU, we have met children who spent months in adult asylum hotels, not knowing how to get help from the local authority, or even what support they are rightfully entitled to. They told us that they did not feel listened to or supported by staff.

When someone in an adult asylum hotel says they are a child, this should be responded to with urgency. The way for a child to find their way out of an adult hotel is for a referral to be made to the local authority the hotel is in, so that a qualified social worker can come and take the child into care as soon as possible. But our experience, and reports from children of trying to get help, suggests that

this is not always being seen as a high-priority safeguarding issue or responded to with urgency by hotel staff. Policy for accommodation providers is inadequate, and does not say that referrals to the local authority should be automatic.

Staff may believe an age assessment has been completed at the border, making the child an adult – though we know in most circumstances, this is not an age assessment carried out by qualified professionals. But the limitations of the for-profit asylum accommodation system also mean support and accountability are hard to come by.

WHO MIGHT A CHILD APPROACH?

There are a number of agencies and organisations whose staff might be asked to help a child wrongly placed in an adult hotel.

Accommodation providers

The Home Office contracts three private companies to provide asylum accommodation across the country through the Asylum Accommodation and Support Contracts (AASC).

In the North West, Serco is the contracted provider. This means that staff in working in hotels - the professionals most likely to be approached by a child looking for help in a hotel - will be employed by Serco or a sub-contractor.

Migrant Help

The Advice, Issue Reporting and Eligibility Contract (AIRE) is held by a different organisation, Migrant Help, to provide advice and assistance to people seeking asylum. They do not usually have a physical presence in hotels.

If people in asylum accommodation approach staff with a problem or complaint, they are likely to be directed to Migrant Help's phone advice line, website or physical office if there is one nearby.

Other agencies

Various charities, faith-based and other organisations do outreach and support work in asylum hotels. People in hotels also have contact with healthcare and education professionals.

Sometimes it is these professionals, rather than the contracted support and advice providers, who raise the alarm when they identify a potential child, and either make the referral to the local authority or ensure that the accommodation provider does so.

Local authorities

According to the Home Office and accommodation providers, when a child identifies themselves in adult accommodation, action should be taken. The accommodation provider is asked to check with the Home Office whether an age assessment has taken place. If it has, the accommodation provider does not need to take further action, but **can** refer to the local authority if they are concerned.

Once a referral to the local authority has been made, a social worker should come to visit the child, as soon as possible, to determine the next steps to be taken.

They often accept their claimed age straight away and take them into care; sometimes they decide to look after them while a full age assessment is carried out; and if they think the person is a “clear and obvious adult” they can document this decision, and they will remain in the hotel.

The local authorities in which the hotels are based are unaware each child exists until they receive a referral. They are given no prior warning by the Home Office that a person who says they are a child but has been determined to be an adult at the border has been placed in adult accommodation in their area. Local authorities are also under high pressure, their capacity being stretched by referrals of children in adult accommodation. In some hotels, there is a quick turnover of residents, meaning new children arrive sometimes on a weekly basis.

“I FELT VERY DISAPPOINTED; I WAS LITERALLY BEING GIVEN NO HELP”: TRYING TO FIND SUPPORT

Newly arrived children will often be unsure who they can trust and may have very little English. Hotels, with staff who are not trained to care for them or offer the appropriate support, are almost impossible to navigate alone. The children we spoke to said there was no interpretation available for them in hotels, making it hard to understand what was happening, and that they needed more support to get help.

When they were signposted to Migrant Help or other support, they were not given enough information to know what to do.

“They don’t have interpreters, so I can’t explain what is going on or what’s happened.”

“With the hotel staff there are no interpreters, only Google translate, it is tricky.”

“It is difficult with language barriers, we can’t understand.”

We asked children what happened when they asked for help getting their age recognised.

“When we go to reception to ask for help, they just point to the notice board.”

“When they brought me to the hotel, I told them my age, they left me there for 3 months and ignored me.”

“Even when I was in the hotel, I was just trying to speak to someone, tell them this wasn’t the right place to be in, but no one listened to me.”

“No one was there. For example, they gave me a map, I don’t know how to use it, I wanted to go to Migrant Help, I got lost and lost the map.” (Another child added) “Yes, I got lost too, no one helps us there.”

“I told staff and they said you will have to speak to your solicitor.”

“We communicated to reception, but they did not say anything.”

“They told me to go to Migrant Help, I did not know how to get there.”

“I was just repeating myself to different people, different organisations, but no one heard me. ”

“I told them (about my age), and they said just wait and be patient.”

“They tell you to go to charity, but I don’t know where. I didn’t get a sim card so I couldn’t go.”

“I shared my story with my teacher and that’s how I came to All4One (GMIAU’s youth group, who then referred him to the local authority).”

From the children’s experiences, it is unclear whether any checks about previous age assessments were made by staff when they presented as a child to them. Their experience was of not being listened to or supported when they reached out for help.

Despite all the barriers placed in front of them, all of the children featured in this report did find their way to support at the All4One group, which they have described as a **lifeline**, the only place they feel safe. Whether through GMIAU staff or another route, they were all visited by local authority social workers and most were removed from adult accommodation – either because they had been determined to be a child, or to be looked after pending further age assessment. For children in the latter category, their ordeal was not over.

“LIKE AN INTERROGATION PROCESS BY POLICE”: AGE ASSESSMENTS CARRIED OUT BY THE NATIONAL AGE ASSESSMENT BOARD

Around half of the children we spoke to were told that they’d need a further age assessment, not by their local authority, but by the National Age Assessment Board (NAAB). It forms another part of the hostile and confusing system they are navigating and another barrier to being believed.



The NAAB was set up by the Home Office as part of the Nationality and Borders Act 2022. It is part of the Home Office and employs social workers to conduct age assessments on the Home Office’s behalf. The NAAB can either be invited by a local authority, to conduct an age assessment instead of social workers employed by that local authority, or the Home Office can force a NAAB age assessment if they disagree with the local authority’s decision to accept a child’s age.

The Home Office, including Ministers in both the current and previous government, claims that the NAAB will “strengthen and improve processes for assessing age”. Along with “scientific” methods, the existence of the NAAB is used to dismiss criticism of Home Office practice. However, we and others have significant concerns about the NAAB’s independence and practice. The British Association of Social Workers have called for the NAAB to be scrapped and advised their members not to take jobs working for the NAAB.

We want to be clear that the NAAB is not the answer to any of the problems detailed in this report.

Children who have had NAAB assessments told us how long the process took, further delaying their feeling settled and safe.

“For 7 months I’m in the minors’ house. So when they said you need an age assessment I said why, I have a document. They said this is what the Home Office requested. Now I’m still waiting for a result.”

“After 4 months they said you are going to have an (NAAB) age assessment. Even though I told them I don’t want to talk about my family, about my mother, they insisted to talk about them.”

We believe NAAB assessments are causing **serious harm** and leading to **incorrect decisions**. Children told us they found the process **hostile** and **retraumatising**, and felt that the Home Office-employed social workers were **biased** against them.

We have seen children’s mental health deteriorate to the point of self-harm and suicidal thoughts as a direct result of NAAB age assessment.

“From the first time, you feel that they are against you. This is their intention, to end with the report that you are an adult.”

“There are many interviews, I don’t know why, they don’t explain why many interviews. You’re a child, they meet you from 10 to 4. They play with the questions to encourage you to make mistakes.”

“They ask you questions which shouldn’t be asked to us as children, they force you to answer questions that don’t relate to the age assessment at all. It’s like an interrogation process by police. They switch you between three persons.”

“They told me we are bringing you here to defend yourself, if you don’t answer my questions we will hold it against you.”

“They kept saying I am angry. I think they meant to do that to me – they make me angry.”

“They were trying to confuse me and say I’d given a different answer, but I was sure about my answer.”

“Why 3, 4, 5 meetings? It should have been only one, because it’s repetition. I think again they’re trying to trap you because they’re trying to show you say things you didn’t say”.

We discussed the NAAB in more detail in our May 2025 [blog](#).

SUMMARY: TRYING TO GET HELP

It is clear from what children tell us that they have been let down, not only by the Home Office officials who interrogated them but by the adults they encountered in asylum accommodation who failed to treat them with the care they needed and failed to raise the urgent safeguarding risk they presented at the earliest possible point.

Once they finally get the opportunity to challenge their age, that initial “significantly over 18” decision still haunts them, and they continue to be disbelieved. Far from “strengthening processes” or righting the wrongs already done, the way the NAAB operates **compounds** the many **injustices** faced by children wrongly treated as adults.

“THEY DON’T BELIEVE YOU HERE”: CONCLUSION

Each child we spoke to gave their own account of **appalling treatment** by the British state. This starts from the moment of reaching dry land in the UK and being intimidated and disbelieved by Home Office border officials; it continues with the frightening isolation of Home Office-contracted asylum accommodation in the North West, and the perplexing labyrinth that is trying to find help; and for some, it is repeated in hours of interrogation by Home Office-employed social workers.

These are children referred to in government guidance as “**some of the most vulnerable children in the country**”, who have fled violence and taken arduous journeys to find safety. Local authorities should be planning for their future in the UK, promoting their ambitions and helping them to recover from the traumatic experiences of the past, as with any looked-after child. Children are at serious risk of exploitation if they do not have trust that the UK will protect and look after them.

WHAT CHILDREN SAY

We asked the group what they would advise for other children in the same situation.

“Waiting is not good, you have to be patient because long, long waiting here.”

“My friend talked to me from Sudan, he said I’m in a terrible situation, can I come here? I said they don’t believe you here.”

“They will put you down, it’s an unfair situation, they will think you’re a liar.”

We also asked what they would like the government to know.

“They ask us not to be angry, not to have bad behavior, but **they make us angry, they created the anger inside us.”**

“They should not leave you waiting for months, trying to find a charity to help you.”

“We are in Great Britain, can you imagine, Great?”

“I struggle to trust people because of everything that had happened to me.”

“They destroy you, **this system destroys you. They destroy me.”**

The government have a legal and moral duty to protect separated children seeking asylum and safeguard their welfare. But the asylum system is designed to prioritise “deterrent” policies over all else – including children’s rights.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The **Home Office** must **acknowledge** that their current practice is leading to children being placed in adult asylum accommodation.

There has been no acknowledgement by the Home Office that their processes at the border are deeply flawed, and causing serious harm to children. Responses to journalists' coverage of the issue, and to MPs' and Lords' questions in Parliament, have focused on "strengthening the age assessment process" and have implied that any flaws in the process err towards too many adults slipping through the net as children – while the numbers show that the opposite is true.

If the Home Office does not acknowledge this is happening, there can be no remedies in place to stop it. The numbers make clear that this is a systemic issue, happening because the system is designed to prioritise "deterrent" policies over children's rights.

Children deserve recognition of the **lasting effects** of the harm they've been put through, and a commitment to put it right.

We hope that local authorities, local politicians and other agencies, including accommodation providers, will work with GMIAU and others on a better local response to a nationwide crisis. We want Greater Manchester to be a welcoming place where separated children feel safe, supported and able to fulfill their potential.

Most importantly we want to see the harm done by current Home Office practice acknowledged, taken seriously, and measures put in place urgently to stop it.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE HOME OFFICE

At the border:

- 1) **Acknowledge the harms caused by current Home Office practice which leads to children being sent to adult asylum hotels.**
- 2) **Immediately suspend any “significantly over 18” decisions pending an investigation.**
 - The failure rate, high level of risk when wrong decisions are made, and reports of inappropriate behaviour by officials making these decisions make it unsafe for these encounters to continue.
 - The Home Office should not be assessing age at the border, and must only treat someone claiming to be a child as an adult in exceptional circumstances, i.e. if there is evidence that they are in their late 20s or older.

In policy:

- 3) **Repeal the changes to the age assessment process introduced in the Nationality and Borders Act (2022).**
 - Abolish the NAAB: the Home Office should not be responsible for assessing age and the NAAB is causing harm. NAAB funding should be redirected to providing direct training and support to local authorities to ensure that age assessments can be local authority-led where they are necessary.

- End the exploration of inaccurate ‘scientific’ methods of assessing age.

4) **End the for-profit model of asylum accommodation.**

- The provision of asylum accommodation should be decentralised, and people should be housed in communities. This would make safeguarding and joined-up working more straightforward for the benefit of all vulnerable people in asylum accommodation.

In the interim, while their current practices continue, the Home Office must:

5) **Notify relevant local authorities** when people who have said they are children are being sent into hotels in their area.

6) **Improve published statistics on age disputes.**

- The Home Office must publish clear data on how many people they treat as adults who are claiming to be children.
- They should also introduce monitoring processes so that full data can be published on how many of those people are later found to be children.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACCOMMODATION PROVIDERS

1) **Immediately refer to the local authority when staff become aware that a potential child is in adult asylum accommodation.**

- Staff in adult asylum accommodation should know that a potential child must be treated as a priority safeguarding issue. As soon as a potential child presents themselves, a referral should be made to the local authority, regardless of what prior decisions have been made by Home Office staff. This should be clear in policy and guidance.

2) **Take all possible measures to safeguard potential children.**

- While the referral to the local authority is pending, any potential children should not have to room share and should be placed in separate rooms. They should also be placed in separate rooms if they are living in a hotel with an ongoing legal challenge against a Home Office or local authority age assessment.

3) **Update training for staff to include the high likelihood of children being treated as adults.**

- Training should be improved to include detail of children's reported experiences at the border and the high likelihood of error in Home Office decisions.
- With this in mind, staff should look proactively for any indication that there may be a child wrongly placed in adult accommodation.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR LOCAL AND COMBINED AUTHORITIES

1) **Ensure social workers' decisions and training include an understanding of the child's experience in the UK.**

- When they are going to meet children in hotels and making decisions about their care, local authority social workers should consider that children may be traumatised by experiences within the UK as well as before arriving.
- They should be aware that the distress caused by Home Office interrogation at the border may have led children to make inconsistent answers or be reluctant to engage.

2) **Ensure that potential children are not held to higher thresholds in assessments when local authority capacity is stretched.**

- When visiting a potential child in adult accommodation to make a brief enquiry, the decision must not be influenced by capacity being stretched or by large numbers of children arriving in adult accommodation in that area.
- While we understand local authorities are stretched, and that this "back door NTS" is deepening their under-funding, the blame lies with the Home Office, and children should not be disadvantaged.

3) **Do not refer children to the National Age Assessment Board (NAAB).**

- Local authorities in the North West should resist using the NAAB, to protect children who have already been traumatised by Home Office age assessment practices. This should include pushing back if the Home Office insists on a NAAB assessment.
- Please see GMIAU's [information sheet](#) on the NAAB for local authorities for more detail, and GMIAU's [blog](#) on children's experiences of the NAAB.