



Greater Manchester

IMMIGRATION AID UNIT

"This system destroys you":

Children trapped in adult asylum hotels by the Home Office

July 2025 | Policy Brief

Our new report is about the experiences of unaccompanied children who have been wrongly treated as adults by the Home Office and sent to adult asylum hotels.

THE PROBLEM

"Significantly over 18"

Children fleeing war and violence arrive in the UK alone to seek safety after long and dangerous journeys to the UK. According to their rights as children, they should be looked after by local authority children's services. They should be supported to recover from their traumatic experiences and to reach their goals and hopes as they build towards a future in the UK.

Instead, far too many children face hostility when they reach the shores of the UK. The Home Office is sending thousands of children to adult asylum accommodation after deciding at the border that they are "significantly over 18". These encounters with the Home Office are described by children as hostile and frightening. The decisions made are wrong more often than not.

Safeguarding catastrophe

In adult asylum hotels, children are at high risk of mental health crisis and exploitation. Children should not be alone in adult settings, without any appropriate safeguarding or support. Unaccompanied children are among the most vulnerable young people in the UK.

Home Office-contracted asylum accommodation staff are not trained to care for unaccompanied children and often do not act with the urgency needed to protect their welfare. Due to a combination of language barriers, poor training and unclear policy, it takes far too long for children to get the social services referral they need to be assessed and get out of the hotel. Sometimes they are trapped there for many months.

This is an ongoing safeguarding catastrophe. There is more than just a risk of harm: there is significant harm happening to children as we write. However, the Home Office has not acknowledged that their decisions are leading to children being sent to adult asylum accommodation.

An urgent overhaul is needed. Instead, the Home Office's response to questions about their practice at the border has focused on measures that make the age assessment process yet more hostile. Specifically, the National Age Assessment Board has been yet another ordeal for some of the children we work with. They tell us they endured long days of questioning that felt hostile, from Home Office-employed social workers. These children have been let down time and time again by the British state, which should be protecting them.

THE EVIDENCE

Our report is based on the experience of the children we've worked with at GMIAU, and on data collected by local authorities and charities.

Data

In the North West, between January 2024 and February 2025, at least 296 children were wrongly sent to adult asylum accommodation, usually hotels. We know this because local authorities record when a referral is made to them of a potential lone child in asylum accommodation. Of the 532 referrals made to just 6 local authorities in the North West during that time period, 56% were decided to be "clear and obvious children" who did not need a further age assessment.

Data collected over a number of years by the Helen Bamber Foundation has shown that when a potential child in adult accommodation is referred to a local authority, they are usually found to be a child: 56% in 2024, and as high as 63% in 2022.

Lived experience

The children we work with spoke powerfully about their experiences.

At the border:

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

"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."

In asylum hotels:

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

"Life in the hotel is miserable."

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

Trying to find help:

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

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

OUR RECOMMENDATIONS

The **Home Office** must **acknowledge** that their current practice is leading to children being placed in adult asylum accommodation. Following this, the necessary action must be taken:

HOME OFFICE	• Suspend all “significantly over 18” decisions until investigated. • Repeal recent changes to age assessments introduced by the Nationality and Borders Act, and end the for-profit asylum housing model. • Meanwhile, the Home Office should notify local authorities when children are placed in hotels and publish clearer data on age disputes.
ACCOMMODATION 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.
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).

Please read [our full report](#) for more detail and email rivka@gmiau.org if you have any questions.