



Media release – embargoed until 00:01 on 26/01/23

## **Over 100 charities call for action on children going missing from Home Office hotels, at risk of trafficking and exploitation**

- Charities including NSPCC, Barnardo's, The Children's Society, ECPAT UK and the Refugee Council have written to the Prime Minister
- Hundreds of children have gone missing from hotels and are suspected of being trafficked and exploited
- The Home Office is unlawfully housing separated children in unsafe hotels, where they could be targeted by criminals

Over 100 charities from the refugee and children's sectors have written to the Prime Minister today to express their grave concern about separated children seeking asylum going missing from Home Office hotels. The children are suspected of being exploited and are accommodated outside of the UK's child welfare framework which applies to all children, regardless of their immigration status.

In the open letter coordinated by ECPAT UK and the Refugee Council, charities including major UK children's charities NSPCC, Barnardo's, Action for Children, Coram, The Children's Society and National Children's Bureau, are calling for the Home Office to stop accommodating separated children in hotels with no further delays. They are also calling for children to be cared for by local authority children's social care, according to the law and with all the safeguards that brings, including having OFSTED oversight, and for an urgent independent inquiry:

*We request the end to this practice immediately with a commitment to an end date after which these practices will not be revived and an urgent independent inquiry given these significant matters of public concern following the reported failures to protect vulnerable children from harm.*

The charities have denounced the continued use of unsafe hotels by the Home Office to accommodate separated children, arguing the practice is unlawful and harmful:

*There is no legal basis for placing children in Home Office hotel accommodation and almost two years into the operation of the scheme which is both unlawful and harmful, it is no longer possible to justify the use of hotels as being 'temporary'. It is a significant departure from the Children Act 1989 and established standards.*

Charities have previously issued multiple warnings to Ministers and government departments about the dangers of the Home Office accommodating children in these hotels. The latest revelations of children going missing surfaced last weekend, with over 100 children found to have been reported missing from a single Sussex hotel, with 79 who remain missing. The government confirmed that there were 440 occurrences of children having gone missing from hotels, and 200 children have never been found.

The letter highlights the government's continued failure to end the harmful practice:

*While the use of hotels for separated children was initially characterised by the Home Office as an “emergency” measure to be operated for “the very shortest of periods”, it has continued for some 18 months. Notwithstanding the unlawfulness of the practice and the hundreds of children that have gone missing and/or been abducted, the Home Office has repeatedly failed to commit to an end date for housing children in this way – despite a recommendation from the ICIBI in October 2022 to end these practices within six months.*

**Enver Solomon, CEO of the Refugee Council, said:**

“We know from our work that children who have experienced unimaginable horror and upheaval coming to our country in search of safety are highly traumatised and vulnerable. Government has a very clear legal duty to protect them but is failing to do so with the equivalent of several classrooms of children seemingly having disappeared into the clutches of those who will exploit and abuse them. This is a child protection scandal that councils the police and ministers must urgently address to ensure every single separated child matters and is kept safe.”

**Patricia Durr, CEO of ECPAT UK (Every Child Protected Against Trafficking), said:**

“This is a national child protection failure - the shocking but inevitable consequence of the Home Office practice of directly accommodating separated children outside of the law. The Home Office has no authority, power or expertise in the care and protection of children.

“Despite evidence of the risks and numerous representations, the government has ignored the warnings and is yet to commit to an exit strategy, seeming to prefer to entrench this discriminatory approach to some of the most vulnerable children with the greatest need of protection and care.

“We need an urgent commitment to end this practice immediately and to ensure that separated children are cared for and protected as all other children within our legal and well-established child welfare framework. Rather than setting up separate provision, the government must provide local authorities with sufficient funds to properly fulfil their legal duties to children.”

—ENDS—

**Notes to editors:**

- Refugee Council press office: [media@refugeecouncil.org.uk](mailto:media@refugeecouncil.org.uk) and 020 7346 1214.
- ECPAT UK press contact: [comms@ecpat.org.uk](mailto:comms@ecpat.org.uk) and 020 7607 2136
- Previous [ECPAT UK report](#) from June 2022 highlighted these concerns
- Charities [wrote to Ministers](#) to highlight these concerns as early as 2021

- The full letter and list of signatories are below:

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

The Rt Hon Gillian Keegan MP  
Secretary of State for Education

The Rt Hon Robert Jenrick  
Minister of State (Minister for Immigration)

**Via email**

26 January 2023

Dear Prime Minister,

**Children missing, trafficked and at-risk in Home Office hotel accommodation for separated children seeking asylum**

We are writing as charities to express our grave concern that separated children seeking asylum are going missing, suspected of being trafficked and criminally exploited, from hotels where they have continued to be accommodated by the Home Office. This is despite urgent requests to Ministers and government departments to discontinue this practice and evidence that these children face significant harm.

There is no legal basis for placing children in Home Office hotel accommodation and almost two years into the operation of the scheme which is both unlawful and harmful, it is no longer possible to justify the use of hotels as being 'temporary'. It is a significant departure from the Children Act 1989 and established standards, including those identified in the Home Office's *Every Child Matters: Change for Children* statutory guidance issued under section 55 of the Borders, Citizenship and Immigration Act 2009, which requires prompt referral of children to local authority care. Moreover, the National Transfer Scheme, implemented through section 72 of the Immigration Act 2016, has the specific aim of ensuring responsibility for looking after separated children is borne by local authorities (not the Home Office).

Despite multiple warnings from charities to the Secretary of State for the Home Department, the Secretary of State for Education, Directors of Children's Services, OFSTED, and a report by the Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration, it has now emerged that many of these children have gone missing from the hotels, targeted by criminal networks and likely now

face exploitation and other forms of significant harm.<sup>1</sup> The latest information provided by your Minister on 24 January 2023 confirmed that 4600 children have been accommodated in these hotels since July 2021 with 440 missing episodes and 200 children who have never been found.<sup>2</sup> The hotels are simply not safe.

While the use of hotels for separated children was initially characterised by the Home Office as “*emergency*” measure to be operated for “*the very shortest of periods*”, it has continued for some 18 months. Notwithstanding the unlawfulness of the practice and the hundreds of children that have gone missing and/or been abducted, the Home Office has repeatedly failed to commit to an end date for housing children in this way – despite a recommendation from the ICIBI in October 2022 to end these practices within six months.<sup>3</sup>

We request the end to this practice immediately with a commitment to an end date after which these practices will not be revived and an urgent independent inquiry given these significant matters of public concern following the reported failures to protect vulnerable children from harm.

Yours sincerely,

Patricia Durr, CEO, ECPAT UK (Every Child Protected Against Trafficking)  
Enver Solomon, CEO, Refugee Council  
Kamena Dorling, Co-Chair, Refugee and Migrant Children’s Consortium  
Sir Peter Wanless, Chief Executive, NSPCC  
Lynn Perry MBE, CEO, Barnardo’s  
Melanie Armstrong, CEO, Action for Children  
Dr Carol Homden CBE, Group Chief Executive, Coram  
Anna Feuchtwang, CEO, National Children’s Bureau (NCB)  
Mark Russell, CEO, The Children’s Society  
Tim Naor Hilton, CEO, Refugee Action  
Kathy Evans, CEO, Children England  
Louise King, Director, Children’s Rights Alliance for England (CRAE)  
Louisa McGeehan, CEO, Just for Kids Law  
Carolyne Willow, Director, Article 39  
Kerry Smith, CEO, Helen Bamber Foundation  
James Wilson, Deputy Director, Detention Action  
Rita Waters, Group Chief Executive, National Youth Advocacy Service (NYAS)  
Fizza Qureshi, CEO, Migrants’ Rights Network  
Jasmine O’Connor, CEO, Anti-Slavery International  
Alison Pickup, Director, Asylum Aid  
Catherine Gladwell, Chief Executive, Refugee Education UK (REUK)  
Rita Gava, Director, Kalyaaan  
Gisela Valle, Executive Director, Latin American Women’s Rights Service (LAWRS)  
Caroline Coombs, CEO, Reunite Families UK  
Stuart Hearne, Director, Islington Law Centre  
Carolyn Housman, CEO, Children and Families Across Borders  
Richard Hammond, Chief Executive, The Separated Child Foundation

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2023/jan/21/they-just-vanish-whistleblowers-met-by-wall-of-complacency-over-missing-migrant-children> and [An inspection of the use of hotels for housing \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](https://publishing.service.gov.uk)

<sup>2</sup> <https://parliamentlive.tv/event/index/8cac9880-7e71-4dc9-8a3b-027b328865fd>

<sup>3</sup> [An inspection of the use of hotels for housing \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](https://publishing.service.gov.uk) and [Response to a report on hotels for housing unaccompanied asylum seeking children, March to May 2022 - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk)

Mia Hasenson-Gross, Executive Director, René Cassin  
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Almir Koldzic, Director of Counterpoints Arts, Refugee Week UK  
Paul Hook, Director, Asylum Matters  
Elaine Ortiz, Director, The Hummingbird Refugee Project  
Jonny Willis, CEO and Co-founder, Refugee Youth Service  
Sally Daghlian OBE, CEO, Praxis  
Emily Crowley, Chief Executive, Student Action for Refugees (STAR)  
Mark Goldring, Director, Asylum Welcome  
Emma Stevenson, Deputy CEO, Choose Love  
Lauren Scott, Executive Director, Refugees at Home  
Sarah Teather, Director, Jesuit Refugee Service UK  
Anna Jones, CEO, RefuAid  
Duncan McAuley, CEO, Action Foundation  
Andrew McCarthy, Head of Services, Bristol Refugee Rights  
Joanne MacInnes, Director, West London Welcome  
Dr Natalia Paszkiewicz, Project Lead, Da'aro Youth Project  
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Sara Robinson, Director, St Augustine's Centre  
Adrian Matthews, Trustee, Cambridge Refugee Resettlement Campaign  
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David Brown, Chair, Birmingham City of Sanctuary  
Christopher Desira, Director, Seraphus  
Dr Rosie Riley, CEO, VITA  
Barbara Forbes, Coordinator, Birmingham Schools of Sanctuary  
Karen Pearce, Director of Positive Action for Refugees and Asylum Seekers  
Eleanor Brown, Managing Director, CARAS  
Rosario Guimba-Stewart, CEO, Lewisham Refugee and Migrant Network  
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Nick Harborne, CEO, Refugee Support Group Berkshire  
Amber Bauer, Founder and CEO, forRefugees  
Celia Sands, CEO, South London Refugee Association  
Jackie Rosenberg, CEO, One Westminster  
Andy Elvin, CEO, TACT Fostering  
Stephen Skeet, Director, Volunteering Matters  
Dr Edie Friedman, Executive Director, The Jewish Council for Racial Equality  
Katharine Sacks-Jones, CEO, Become  
Robyn Kemp, Chair, Social Pedagogy Professional Association  
Lauren Seager-Smith, CEO, Kidscape  
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Bronagh Andrew, Operations Manager, TARA Service  
Amber Ray, Communications Officer, Calderdale Valley of Sanctuary  
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Naomi Webb, Executive Director, Good Chance Theatre  
Dr. Nazee Akbari, Chief Executive Officer, New Citizens' Gateway

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Vicki Felgate and Kayte Cable, Co-Founders, Big Leaf Foundation  
Lilian Geijssen, Director Europe, Ben & Jerry's  
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