

What Now For The Unaccompanied Calais 'Jungle' Children Arriving In The UK?

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MARY TURNER VIA GETTY IMAGES

A distinct lack of compassion pervades much of the press coverage of unaccompanied children arriving from the Calais 'Jungle' camp this week under the Dubs Amendment. It is as if our collective consciousness has been unable to reconcile the abhorrent images on our TV screens of blood-stained children whose lives have been decimated with bombing and lungs filled with noxious chemical

weapons, with the grief stricken, disorientated children arriving with nothing and no one in 'our back yard'. Quite apart from witnessing unimaginable trauma in their countries of origin the recent arrivals, which includes fifty girls, have endured life in the sprawling make-shift camp vulnerable to disease, trafficking, sexual exploitation and abuse for many months.

What now for these unaccompanied minors as they embark on a new life alone and devoid of the familiarity of their family, culture and country? After an arduous journey, on arrival they will first be met with the friendly face of an immigration official who will interview them. This will be in the presence of a social worker likely in their second or third language and will result in an asylum claim being registered.

Next the child will be taken into the care of social services in the local authority of entry. In real terms this means being placed in a 'reception centre'. They should remain for no more than six to eight weeks. However, they may only be there a matter of days before being transferred to another locality. Recently appointed Minister of State for Immigration Robert Goodwill has urged all local authorities to participate in the National Transfer Scheme which aims to fairly distribute these children across the country. If the entry local authority has reached their quota of 0.07% the child will then be transported to another locality.

The local authority will then determine the legal status of that child. By virtue of their having no parents or responsible adult to care for them they will likely be deemed a 'child in need'. The Local authority, supported by central funding from the home office, then has a legal responsibility for that child and will be able to do anything that is necessary to safeguard and promote their welfare. This will mean that an assessment of their social care, health and education needs should follow.

Once the child has been accommodated by the Local Authority for 24 hours they become 'looked after' albeit by virtue of special measures and without the formality of court proceedings typically forming an integral part of the care system for British children. Ultimately these children will be placed in children's homes or with foster carers but may not be adopted. It does not appear that a settled home life will follow for many of these children who will remain in the care of the local authority until they reach adulthood. Then dependent upon the outcome of their asylum claim as care leavers they may be deported to their country of origin.

Local Authorities have a statutory duty to promote the educational achievement of 'looked after' children. All children residing in the UK have a human right to education. The admissions code provides that children arriving from overseas and outside of the EU save for very limited exceptions (namely tourists or those entering on study visas) have a right to a state-funded education in the UK. With regard to admission to school, unaccompanied minors should receive fair treatment which meets the same standard a British child would receive. In real terms for those arriving this week, once they have been placed in the local authority that will remain responsible for them, they will require in-year admission placements in school. The local authority may direct a maintained school to admit a 'looked after' child. The position is slightly different for academies however the Secretary of State can intervene if an academy is not receptive to the proposed placement.

There is no doubt that our public services are stretched and local authorities leading the way in accommodating these children are appealing for more assistance from Home Office. However for the many children who will remain in the UK into adulthood, their life chances will increase and therefore long term dependency on state services decrease the better care they receive and higher their educational outcomes. With a 'can do' attitude, that historically at least was synonymous with British values we can welcome and accommodate these vulnerable children. Surely we have not become so desensitised to the images of war and displaced children on our TV screens that we cannot extend compassion to children so much less fortunate than our own. If the boot was on the other foot how would we feel if these were our children needing to be looked after?

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