

"A PLACE CALLED HOME"

REFUGEE CHILDREN IN LONDON

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INTRODUCTION

The Childhood Trust is London's child poverty charity, dedicated to alleviating the impact of poverty on children and young people living in the capital. Children who experience poverty encounter various intricate challenges that can hinder their growth and diminish their potential. London has the highest rate of child poverty in England [28]. The Childhood Trust's work is focused on supporting the 800,000 plus children living in poverty in the capital.

Refugee children make up a large number of London's most disadvantaged and vulnerable children and young people. In 2022, a total of 45,755 individuals, including men, women, and children, crossed the Channel by small boat to reach the UK. Of this group, 16 percent were children.

Based on our experience of supporting work with child refugees, we understand that the 7,177 refugee children, who arrive alone or with their families, are very likely to have undergone a traumatic experience during their dangerous and difficult journey.

Upon arrival in the U.K. many children often face suspicion and challenges due to their age, leading many of them to be placed in unsafe and inappropriate accommodation [1]. Children arriving in London who have fled war and persecution require a wide range of support services, such as counselling and mental health support, food provision, housing support, language support, play and cultural activities, and special educational needs support.

Amidst the crisis in the asylum system and the ongoing discourse on asylum process management, this report offers insights into the experiences of refugee children and the support provided by charitable organisations funded by The Childhood Trust in London.

This report would not have been possible without the partnership of Action for Refugees in Lewisham and the courageous children who, supported by their parents and AFRIL staff, shared their experiences with us.

Their testimonies can be heard in this short film: <https://youtu.be/Gp1nBj9XJcc>

BACKGROUND

Asylum in the UK has been a topic of debate for many years, with the current debate on asylum policy centred around a number of key issues. One of the main areas of focus is the way in which asylum seekers are processed and housed [26]. The current system is overly bureaucratic, slow, and inhumane, with many asylum seekers being forced to live in substandard conditions while their claims are processed. Another current area of debate is the issue of deportations [4]. There is vigorous opposition to the Government's proposed deportation policy with critics arguing that it is too harsh, with asylum seekers facing being sent back to countries where they face persecution, violence, or other forms of harm.

The debate on asylum policy in the UK is complex and multifaceted, with a range of different views and opinions on how best to support and manage the asylum process. While there is no easy solution, it is clear that policymakers must take into account the needs and rights of asylum seekers, as well as the concerns of the wider public, if they are to develop a fair and effective asylum policy for the UK.

The asylum process has a significant impact on children, particularly those who are unaccompanied minors. The asylum process can affect children in the following ways:

A lengthy and uncertain process

A recent report published by the Refugee Council has unveiled a shocking increase in the number of asylum seekers in the UK who are forced to wait for over a year to receive an initial decision on their status [26]. New data released by the Refugee Council charity highlights the severity of the asylum backlog crisis, with tens of thousands of individuals stuck in the system for over a year, putting their lives on hold. The figures reveal that the asylum backlog has quadrupled in the past five years, with 122,206 people waiting for an initial decision in June 2023, compared to 29,522 in December 2017. Even more concerning is the comparison over 10 years, with only 12,808 people waiting for an initial decision in December 2012 [26].

Freedom of Information requests obtained by the charity show that 725 people, including 155 children, have been in limbo for over five years, indicating that the number of people waiting in the asylum system has been steadily increasing over the past five years, challenging claims that it is solely due to higher numbers crossing the English Channel in small boats in the year 2022 [26].

The analysis further indicates that the average waiting time for an initial decision on an asylum case is likely to be between one and three years. The report highlights the severe impact of these delays on the mental health and wellbeing of asylum seekers, who have fled war, terror, ongoing conflict, and persecution in their home countries. Refugee Council staff frequently witness individuals becoming increasingly vulnerable and unstable as years of delays and uncertainty take a toll on their mental and physical health, sometimes leading to self-harm and suicidal ideation [27].

Separation from family

Children who are seeking asylum with their families may be separated from one or both parents during the asylum process. Refugee children who are unaccompanied or separated constitute a significant subgroup, with estimates from the Separated Children in Europe Programme (SCEP) indicating that almost 12,800 unaccompanied children claimed asylum (UASC) in Europe during 2006. In the past decade, the United Kingdom has received asylum claims from more than 30,000 children of this category [2]. There are notable differences between accompanied and unaccompanied children and separation from the primary caregiver could make the young person perceive the separation as a distressing event [3] and the unavailability of the primary caregiver in the post-migration period may serve as a missing protective factor. This can be traumatic for children, who may experience anxiety, depression, and other mental health problems as a result.

Limited access to education

Children who are seeking asylum may have limited access to education while their claims are being processed. Refugee children may face additional challenges in group settings at school due to a lack of prior group experiences or past trauma and violence. Psychological support may be necessary to help them concentrate on their schoolwork. However, various obstacles such as the absence of support programmes, difficulty identifying and assessing their needs, family reluctance towards counselling, and language barriers may hinder the necessary attention to their needs [4]. This can have a long-term impact on their educational outcomes and their ability to integrate into their new communities.

Detention

According to the International Detention Coalition, immigration detention refers to the detention of individuals based on their migration status, and this practice has been on the rise for the past two decades [5]. The UK has one of the largest detention systems in Europe and is unique in its use of indefinite detention without time limit [6], which applies to asylum seekers, refugees, migrants, and individuals without immigration status. This policy violates the fundamental human rights principle of liberty [7]. Immigration authorities may detain children seeking asylum, whether with their families or as unaccompanied minors, causing significant stress and trauma that can negatively affect their mental health and overall wellbeing in the long term.

Overall, the rights of children seeking asylum, including their physical and mental health, access to education and legal representation, and their right to be free from detention and other forms of harm must be protected. Adequate support and protection must be provided to ensure that their best interests are upheld throughout the asylum process.

In this report, we wanted to better understand and document how the charities that we fund in London are responding to the asylum crisis through the support they provide for refugee and asylum seeking families and children.

A mixed-methods approach was employed to investigate the issue, which involved administering a survey questionnaire to 80 charities working with children and young people in London to gain a better understanding of their current support for refugee children and their plans for assisting refugees. The survey received 21 responses within the given one-week timeframe. In addition, follow-up phone interviews were conducted with three of the charities that participated in the survey. The study also involved interviews with seven children between the ages of 6 and 17 who were being supported by Action for Refugees in Lewisham. The resulting report sheds light on the complex challenges faced by displaced children from diverse countries, and a film featuring the children's experiences was produced to provide a human perspective to the asylum debate.

DEFINITIONS

Refugee: According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees a refugee is 'someone who is unable or unwilling to return to their country of origin owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion.' [10]

Asylum Seeker: An asylum seeker 'is a person who has left their country of origin and formally applied for asylum in another country but whose application has not yet been concluded.' [11] In the UK, asylum seekers are recognized and granted refugee status following a successful claim.

KEY FINDINGS

- **18% of the children supported by our partner charities are refugees.**
- **Refugee children from 28 different countries are supported by our partners. The most common countries of origin are Afghanistan, Eritrea, Syria, Ethiopia, Somalia, and Iran.**
- **53% of the charities have been engaging with refugee children for over a year, with less than 6% supporting them for 3 months or less.**
- **The biggest challenges facing asylum seekers and refugee children are poverty, housing insecurity, mental health, and language barriers.**

CURRENT CHALLENGES AND SUPPORT FOR REFUGEE CHILDREN IN LONDON

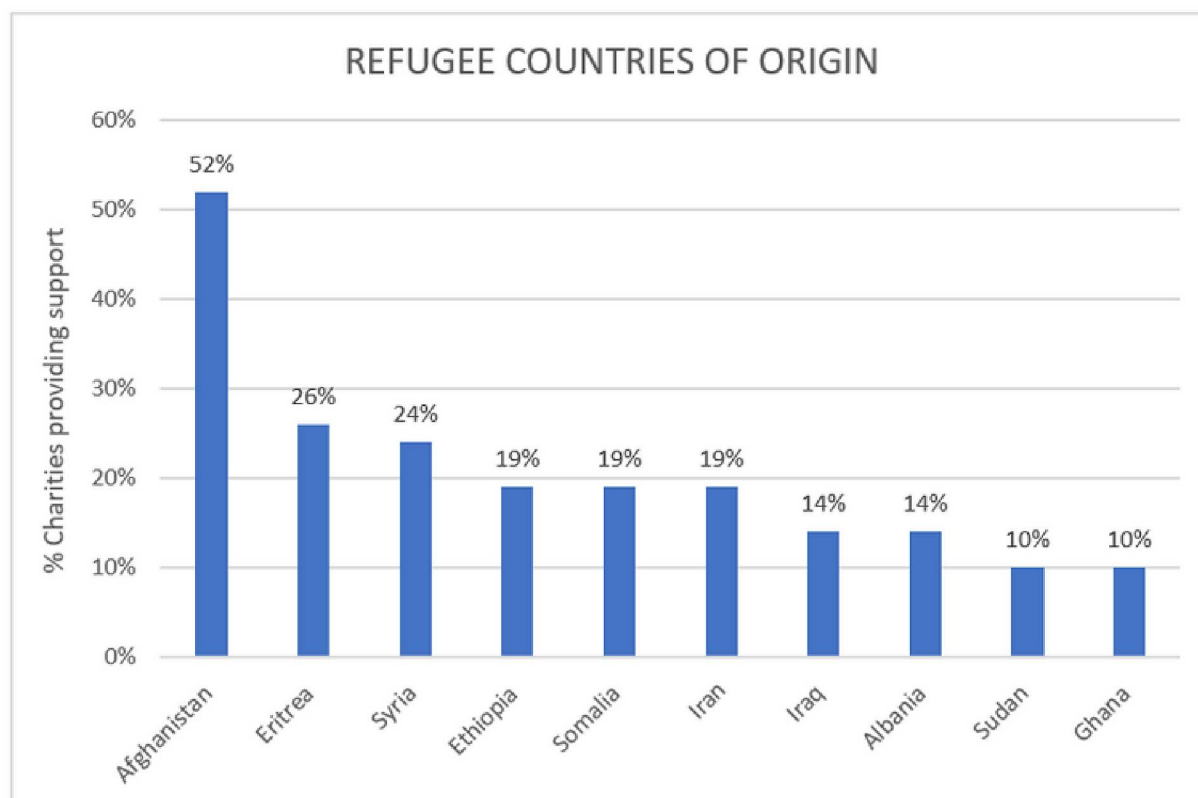
The number of asylum applications in the UK in 2022 reached 74,751 for main applicants, which is more than double the number in 2019. This exceeds the peak number of applications during the European Migration crisis, which was 36,546 in the year ending June 2016, and represents the highest number of applications in nearly 20 years, since 2003 [12]. London has long provided a home to many of those seeking refuge from around the world.

Whilst the majority of refugees in London have applied for asylum (the exact figure is unknown), approximately 1,088 have been resettled by local authorities and community groups through the Resettlement and Community Sponsorship Scheme [11]. Of note to this study, there are a further 1,600 Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children (UASC) in the city [11], who have often endured significant horrors and require specialist welfare support and therapy.

The findings from this study provide a snapshot of the current situation in London:

In total, the 21 charities currently support 2,127 refugee children per year. Of the organisations that engage with displaced children, on average, 18% of their beneficiaries are refugees. Notably, there are disparities of engagement between the projects due to the varied nature of service provision. Three charities are not suitable for providing support, whereas in six of the charities, more than 25% of their beneficiaries are refugees.

The charities care for children from 28 different states, with the most common countries of origin being those experiencing conflict and civil unrest. Graph 1 illustrates the proportions of charities in the study that are supporting refugee children from the top 10 countries [9]. Interestingly, these findings capture the recent destruction and displacement caused by the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan in August 2021 [13], which official government sources are yet to publish.

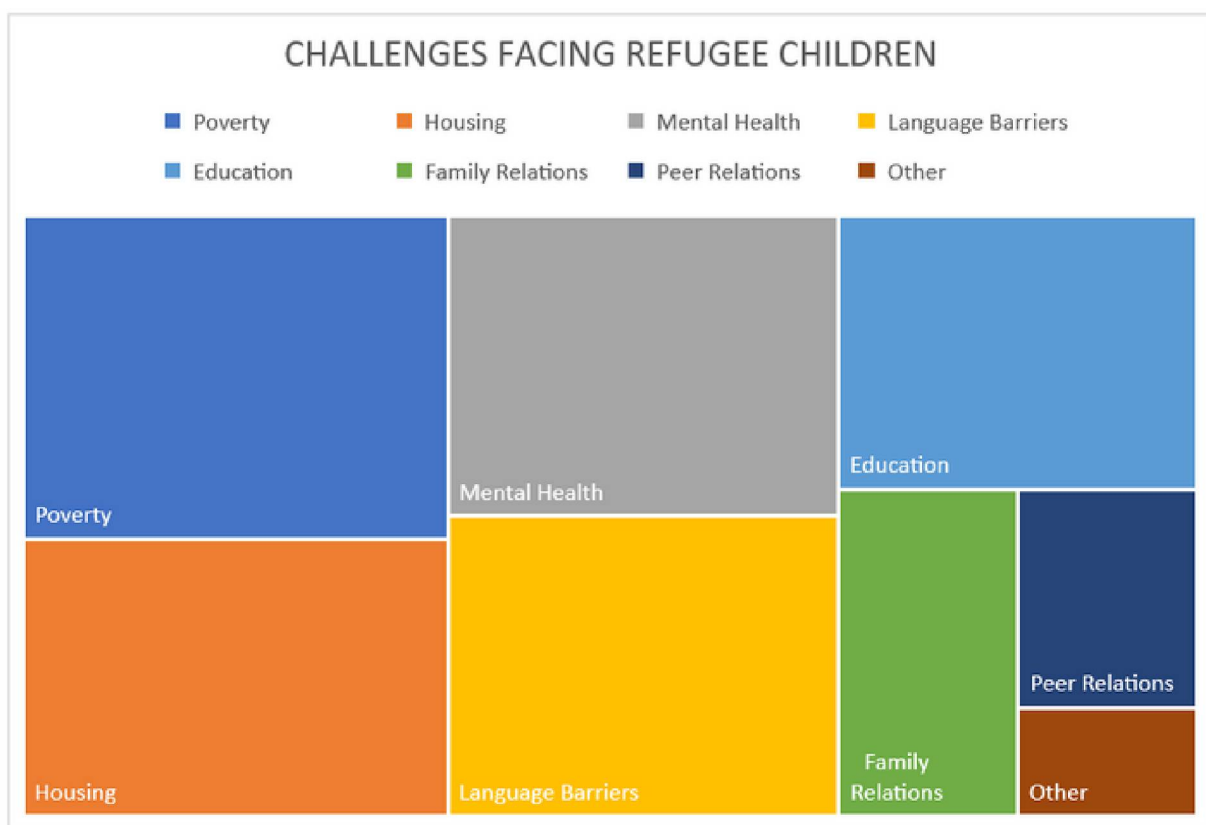


Graph 1: The Childhood Trust, 2022

The findings from this study uncover a number of pressing challenges experienced by refugee children in London.

The UK government has created a hostile environment for families and children going through the asylum process. While asylum accommodation is provided by the Home Office, cash supports are minimal, and asylum seekers are unable to work or claim for benefits [14]. Once refugee status has been acquired, asylum seekers have just 28 days to find a new home, employment, or set up a Universal Credit claim [11]. This timeframe is unrealistic, and creates a crisis situation in which refugee families and children face destitution. Poverty is augmented by insecurity and unaffordability in the private rental market. Refugees are unable to save for a deposit due to minimal financial support during the asylum process, and are subject to substandard living conditions and the persistent risk of eviction and homelessness.

Graph 2 demonstrates this, with the larger surface areas denoting greater importance [9]. 53% of the charities have been engaging with refugee beneficiaries for over a year (with less than 6% supporting for 3 months or less), suggesting these challenges are complex, structurally embedded, and difficult to overcome.



Graph 2: The Childhood Trust, 2022

Asylum Accommodation

In the UK, the government provides "asylum accommodation" to prevent homelessness among those who claim asylum. This is governed by Sections 98, 95, and 4 of the 1999 Immigration Act. However, instead of relying on local authorities or housing associations, the government has outsourced the provision of accommodation to private companies such as Serco, Mears, and Clearsprings Ready Homes, which operate on a profit-based model. The Home Office guidelines stipulate that asylum seekers should be housed in temporary "initial accommodation" for a maximum of 3-4 weeks before being moved to longer-term "dispersal accommodation" while their asylum claims are processed [15]. However, the distinction between the two types of accommodation has become blurred due to the increasing use of "contingency" accommodation in hotels since 2019. As of the end of 2022, more than 100,000 people had been waiting for 6 months or more for a decision on their asylum claims.

Those seeking asylum face significant challenges as they live on very low levels of asylum support, with long delays in accessing financial support. Many report waiting for months without any funds to purchase basic necessities and are unable to work. Some are even facing destitution, struggling to buy essential items such as winter clothing, bus fares, school uniforms, toiletries, baby milk, and food. On inquiry, a refugee child explained,

"then we moved to a hotel that was really far away from my school and I had wake up at 5am so we can arrive early to my school. We then rented one bedroom the bed had holes... we had to bring our own food...there was only breakfast served, if you miss it you didn't get breakfast so you had to take buy your own money from the shops... Mama money worked in a lot of restaurants, she worked in the kitchen and she got 50 pounds a week and it was not enough to do all the stuff that we needed to do."

Reuben, 9

Due to the significant increase in the use of 'contingency' accommodation in hotels since the awarding of new contracts to private providers in 2019, the distinction between initial and dispersal accommodation has effectively disappeared. Presently, almost 50,000 individuals seeking asylum are staying in hotels for months and, at times, even years, while their claims are processed. Shockingly, as of the end of 2022, over 109,000 individuals (representing 68% of all asylum applicants and dependents) had been waiting for over six months for a decision on their asylum claims [16].

Those seeking asylum are living on extremely low levels of support, with those in hotels receiving just £9.50 per week and those in dispersal accommodation receiving £45 per week. Additionally, there are long delays in accessing financial support, leaving many unable to purchase essential items. According to our research, those in hotels (including families with children) had to wait on average 2.3 months to receive the necessary financial support.

Over half (52%) of those we surveyed stated that they could not afford essential items. The complex policies surrounding dispersal, housing, decision-making, and support determine the conditions in which individuals seeking asylum live. While some may present these issues as a result of coincidental policy-making, it is essential to acknowledge that the system is intentionally designed to detain asylum seekers in conditions that violate their basic human rights.

Tamira, 11 explains the conditions of her accommodation;

“living in this small room for a few years...every single night it'll be really cold, and there's not much warmth there would be a lot of spiders and bugs crawling around, and lots of dirt and dust.” She continued, “If I could wish for anything, I would wish for a place called home, where everything is comfy.”

Tamira, 11

Halz 6, explained the scarcity of food and funds,

“I've been feeling hungry for a whole day and no food, no water, and nothing to eat, and we don't have a lot of money to pay for food... you can be hungry and starving.”

Halz, 6

Inadequate and unsafe accommodation represents some of the challenges facing refugee children and their families. Children and their families are exposed to exploitation and human trafficking. British Immigration Minister Robert Jenrick has informed parliament that since the UK government began housing child asylum seekers in hotels due to pressure on the country's asylum accommodation system, several hundred minors have gone missing. This has led to calls for an investigation into the matter. According to Jenrick, around 200 children are still missing out of the 440 reported missing occurrences among the 4,600 unaccompanied children housed in hotels since July 2021 [18].

Trauma & disconnection

Trauma is primarily characterized by disconnection. Practitioners at the projects we support focus on helping separated children piece together the different aspects of their lives. Often, they are subject to alienation and solitude, making them conceal their immigration status in the hope of fitting in [20]. Interviewees explained:

“I didn't tell them that I'm a refugee. I think that people think that refugees don't have their place in this country.”

Ana, 9

“For people who don't want like refugees to come here, they should note that they don't know how far they've come and what they've suffered through or the pain and nervousness inside them.”

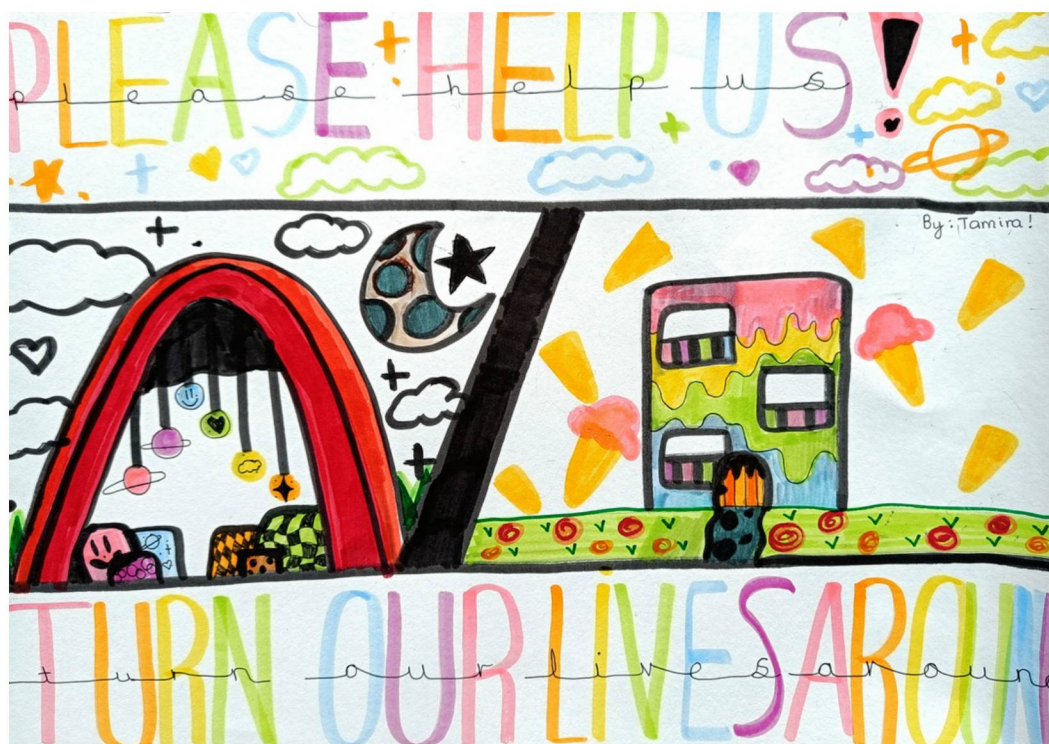
Tamira, 11

Providing creative spaces for exploration, questioning, and expression, that do not necessarily rely on language has proven beneficial in making them feel connected to their environment and the people around them [20]. Such processes can boost children's confidence, teach them new skills, and help them overcome feelings of loneliness and anxiety about their uncertain futures. With careful and thoughtful management, creative projects can empower young people to tell their own stories and connect with themselves on a deeper level, free from external constraints. The study utilized a similar method where children were requested to express their understanding of their lived experiences by creating illustrations [21] Tamira, 11, when questioned whether she remembered getting to the UK and her journey, she responded she did not but went to explain,

“I was seven when it happened. The bad thing that people wanted to get away from was wars, and the army from another country kicking them out of their homes...the younger children have to leave their home country and go into in another country they haven't heard of...when they're older then they'll actually realize what happened to them when they were younger.”

Tamira, 11

The image depicted here was drawn by Tamira to portray her personal reality and the hope she held onto. She imagined a country where children could eat ice-cream every day.



Psychological Challenges

Individuals seeking asylum and refugees frequently encounter considerable pre-existing physical and mental health issues, which may have resulted from traumatic experiences, including exposure to conflict, violence, danger, exploitation, and bereavement. Tamira, 11 stated in her interview,

“for people who don't want like refugees to come here um they should note that they don't know how far they've come and what they've suffered through or the pain and nervousness inside them”

Moreover, they may encounter various obstacles during the asylum-seeking process, such as uncertainty regarding housing, finances, and employment, as well as difficulties accessing adequate medical care [22]. The subsequent quote describes a common sentiments expressed by children throughout their asylum journey:

“I feel lonely, and sad”
Tareeqe, 7

Traumatic experiences were common to all the children who we spoke with. Tareeqe produced the picture below to help him describe how the men in army trucks set light to his house with his family locked inside. He calmly described how they escaped and made it to London, represented by the tall building depicted in yellow to the right of the picture. Many refugee children experience poor mental health and may require years of support to fully process the trauma they have experienced.



CONCLUSION

This study indicates that a significant population of refugee children in London are facing multiple entrenched challenges, including poverty, housing insecurity, poor mental health, and language and educational barriers. Whilst charitable organisations across the city are providing crucial support services, they are operating at full capacity.

The relatively recent displacement of predominantly women and children from the Ukrainian crisis, coupled with ever more refugee children arriving on small boats has prompted several charities in London to establish child focused integration plans for refugee children.

Given that the current government initiatives fall short of safeguarding the welfare of refugee children, the readiness and willingness of third-sector organisations to offer assistance is vital to the well-being and successful integration of refugee children into British society. However, additional funding is crucial for these charities to expand their services effectively.

Whilst The Childhood Trust is a major source of funding, those with the ability to financially support charities and refugee families need to rise to the challenge to ensure that the necessary support is delivered for the thousands of refugee children currently in London.



"It was so dark and I didn't know how to swim. I thought the sea monster was going to swallow me up"

Ina, 6

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