

# WRITTEN STATEMENT

# BY

# THE WELSH GOVERNMENT

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| **TITLE** | **Unaccompanied children seeking sanctuary in Wales** |
| **DATE** | **16 January 2020** |
| **BY** | **Jane Hutt AM, Deputy Minister and Chief Whip**  **Julie Morgan AM, Deputy Minister for Health and Social Services** |

Last week, we wrote to the Home Secretary in support of the campaign to retain the duty to negotiate for the current refugee family reunion rights to remain in the EU Withdrawal Bill 2019. This week in plenary, the First Minister made his same position clear. Last week, the House of Commons voted to ignore the best interests of refugee children in Europe and deny them the right to a family life in the UK. It is of great regret to us all that the UK Government has taken a position contrary to the ‘proud history’ record it often invokes in respect of granting asylum to those that need it. In this instance, it has not brought real meaning to those words. The debate continues in the House of Lords and the Withdrawal Bill will return to the Commons next week. We await the outcome of the votes and urge Parliament to keep the current provisions.

In Wales, we do what we safely can to welcome unaccompanied asylum seeking children who arrive here with no family to go to and we have taken a range of positive actions to support them. Wales is home to around 100 unaccompanied asylum seeking children without families to join. Most of these young people do not arrive in a planned way, via a government scheme (such as the Dubs Scheme provided for via section 67 of the Immigration Act 2016). This places unique pressures on our social care and other public services. This is why we have invested over half a million pounds in funding social work support, training, resources and research for social workers and foster carers to build their professional capacity, cultural competence and confidence in supporting these young people. We treat unaccompanied asylum seeking children as looked after children with the same rights and entitlements that the Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act 2014 provides. The legal duties to provide for these young people rests with our public services. Therefore, we want them to be as equipped and skilled as they need to be to respond to the particular needs of these young people.

We work with local authorities, funding them directly and with the WLGA and the Wales Strategic Migration Partnership. The WLGA and WSMP manage some of the Welsh Government funding and with one of the activities it has commissioned with our funding is a series of English and Welsh language learning and activities weeks. The young people have benefitted enormously from this time, improving their language skills and social confidence. We have also funded the four Health Boards which cover the adult dispersal areas to deliver health services to adult and child asylum seekers and refugees. With this funding, in Gwent, a part time Health Visitor has been appointed specifically to deliver health services for children and in Cardiff, the Health Access Practice continues to deliver health services to children including additional mental health support. We have also made Regulations which give powers to housing associations to accommodate young people resettled in Wales under the Dubs Scheme and we have made Regulations which give the same young people access to Student Loans.

Alongside our public services, we want our Third sector and grassroots partners to continue their efforts, working alongside statutory organisations, supporting and supplementing their work. The Welsh Refugee Council and partners are funded by the Welsh Government to deliver the Asylum Rights Programme and within that, age dispute advocacy is provided for these young people in addition to the advocacy which is available via the Social Services Act. We are very grateful to our social workers, foster carers, health practitioners, the Third and grassroots sectors and to the volunteers for all they do to provide care and support to these young people.

Wales has provided placements for 18 young people in Wales via the Dubs Scheme. This number, when compared against the numbers accommodated in England and our respective nation’s populations, shows a higher proportion with us here in Wales. For a small country, we are pulling our weight. Again, proportionally, more of Wales’ local authorities provide homes to these young people than English councils. We would like to offer sanctuary to more young people and we believe that if the UK Government was serious about protecting child refugees, it would properly fund schemes such as Dubs and enable local authorities to increase their capacity to support. The Dubs Scheme has never been funded or actively supported in the same way as other UK Government schemes such as the Syrian Persons Resettlement Scheme and its replacement. We know a daily rate is paid by the Home Office but it is insufficient to cover the full costs and we have made this case to the Home Office on numerous occasions. Again, if the UK Government wishes to bring real meaning to its expression of a ‘proud history’ of providing international protection, it would do well to provide proper support to the local authorities that work hard to deliver for these young people, day in, day out.

To quote Lord Dubs, a powerful advocate for refugee children, it would be a ‘betrayal of Britain’s humanitarian position’ if the UK Government didn’t do all it could to support some of the most vulnerable people in the world, who through no fault of their own have fled war, poverty, persecution, climate change and terrorism. This support should include the proper funding of local authorities by the UK Government to deliver for these young people.