



Foreign &
Commonwealth
Office

Children coming to the UK: A guide to working with the Foreign and Commonwealth Office

The situation

The Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) has a consular network around the world, based in British Embassies and High Commissions. Any cases involving child safeguarding issues are referred to the Consular Assistance Department, Child Protection Unit (CPU). Within this team we have an experienced child and families qualified social worker. Our staff around the network are not social workers but are trained to provide empathetic help and support to British nationals who find themselves in difficulty overseas.

Around the world, every year, many British children suffer from a variety of safeguarding problems. These range from being orphaned, abducted, neglected, abused or subjected to unacceptable physical discipline. Local authorities, concerned adults, or the children themselves may contact their embassy to inform them of such concerns. In the majority of cases, embassies and the CPU are able to safeguard children through working with authorities in the country concerned, NGOs and families. If all other options are exhausted, the FCO will work to bring the child back to the UK.

What does FCO do?

The FCO is not a statutory safeguarding body, but considers child protection of the utmost importance. In child safeguarding cases, CPU and embassies will liaise with relevant NGOs (including Reunite for child abductions, CFAB and others) as well as police, local authorities and wider family and friends who can assist in caring for a child. In many cases, the FCO is able to support local arrangements for the child.

The FCO is not able to provide accommodation or protection for the child and family, or make formal welfare assessments. They cannot interfere with local and overseas legislation and policies, but will work within these to achieve results. The assistance of child safeguarding professionals, both in the UK and overseas, is essential to safeguard children.

What actions does FCO take?

The CPU will ensure that they exhaust all possible options open to them to ensure a child's safety in a country and/or once they return to the UK. A comprehensive risk assessment is made, based on information from both the UK and in-country children services (where available). We also liaise with NGOs, including shelters. Following this, a decision may be made that it is the child's best interests to return to the UK.

Why do we ask Children's Services to help?

In exceptional circumstances we may assess that the best interests of the child are served by them returning to the UK.

When the child is due to be returned to family in the UK, we will refer any safeguarding concerns we have to the most relevant Children's Services. Usually, this will be the area where the family live. The CPU needs to ensure that the child's needs are considered paramount, and that appropriate care will be provided on arrival, which may require viability assessments on extended family members and friends and/or a child and family assessment.

In an unaccompanied minor case, we can only return the child to the UK if the local Children's Services department makes appropriate care arrangements prior to the child's arrival. In some cases the child may need to be made a ward of court to ensure that the child can safely leave the country they are in.

The CPU will ensure that Children Services department receive comprehensive referrals and information on the case as soon as it is available, including any assessments and reports completed by in-country departments. This will ensure that a suitable care plan can be agreed for the child promptly. The CPU will also ensure that regular updates are received to allow all relevant safeguarding information to be shared and discussed.

How can we help Children's Services?

As well as cases which originate with a referral to an embassy, we receive a number of requests for help from Childrens Services departments in the UK. Help we have given in the past has included putting UK Childrens Services directly in touch with local children's services, advising on legal status in the other country, making a consular visit (but not a formal welfare visit) to children residing abroad.

In one recent case, four children were made wards of court, but too late to prevent them from leaving the UK. Our embassy worked closely with local authorities including social services, immigration and the police. After direct pressure from consular staff, the police located the family and arranged for them to be deported to the UK. Our consular officer ensured the logistics worked; arranging for money to be sent to pay the visa fine, ensuring they had appropriate travel documents and other appropriate safeguarding measures in place. The family were returned to the UK and met at the airport by Children's Services. Without the efforts of the embassy, the children would have remained in squalid conditions, at risk of being detained for immigration offences.

If social workers are planning to travel overseas they are responsible for ensuring that they are able to operate legally in the country with permission from the responsible authorities, and that they have the appropriate visa and insurance. The FCO is not able to assist with these arrangements.

Contact Us:

We are very happy to receive queries from Children Social Care departments and other departments who are working with vulnerable British children and families who may be at risk overseas.

Please contact the CPU on childabduction@fco.gsi.gov.uk. This address is monitored Monday- Friday during office hours.

For emergency out of hours assistance please telephone 020 7008 1500 and request consular assistance.