

A chance for a better future

Supported independent
living and the protection
of unaccompanied children
in Greece

November 2021



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COVER

Unaccompanied refugee children have been separated from parents or other legal or customary caregivers, as well as other adult relatives, and travel alone.



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Children are one of the most vulnerable groupings amongst those who migrate. They have complex needs, including for a safe and stable environment, as well as access to healthcare, education and tailored, child-friendly services. Within this group, unaccompanied children, - those 'who have been separated from both parents and other relatives and are not being cared for by an adult who, by law or custom, is responsible for doing so'¹ - are particularly exposed to increased risks of violence, abuse, and exploitation. As a result, they need targeted and appropriate services to scale, including adequate identification and registration, guardianship and legal representation, quality accommodation and care arrangements.²

As of 15 October 2021, there were 2,159 unaccompanied children in Greece, the vast majority of whom were boys over 16 years of age.³ In the preceding 18 months, more than 1,000 other children were relocated from Greece to other European countries as part of a voluntary relocation scheme to assist the most vulnerable and decongest gravely overcrowded camps and reception facilities.⁴ The reality that over 37,000 unaccompanied children were referred for accommodation in Greece since 2016,⁵ indicates the scale of the needs and the multiple challenges the country has faced in trying to address them. Added to this, more than 18,000 unaccompanied refugee children and adolescents disappeared from state care across Europe between 2018 and 2020,⁶ including 2,118 from Greece,⁷ revealing just how vulnerable and at-risk this group can be.

Undeniably, Greece was not equipped to face the scale of the needs that arose with the arrival of these children. Age-appropriate, quality care arrangements, in line with the best interests of the child, were sorely lacking, leaving thousands of children out of long-term accommodation, in precarious conditions, in homelessness or even detention. From the moment of first arrival in the country, unaccompanied children's safety is impacted as a result of inadequate first reception, identification and registration services and the lack of

appointed guardians. If children are not officially recognised as children following the identification stage, then they are forced to live with unknown adults, in inadequate accommodation, without the protection services they need and are entitled to.

In November 2019, the Prime Minister of Greece made a public pledge to protect unaccompanied children through the 'No Child Alone' scheme,⁸ at a time when over 5,000 were present in the country.⁹ Since then, Greece has made considerable improvements in the protection of unaccompanied children, especially in the provision of quality accommodation and care arrangements. Important advances include the legal abolition of 'protective custody'¹⁰ and the gradual phasing out of 'safe zones' and hotels as means of accommodation. Significantly, the creation of supported independent living apartments demonstrated a marked shift from institutional care and other more isolating and

segregated settings to more appropriate, supported and empowering independent living. However, despite these welcome improvements, serious gaps in the protection of unaccompanied children remain.

Providing sufficient safety and support for unaccompanied children is the joint responsibility of both Greece and the EU as a whole, as

part of the wider refugee response and in line with EU values and law. The relocation of over 1,000 children from Greece to other European countries¹¹ is a practical show of solidarity that has also allowed Greece to protect the children remaining in its territory more effectively. Still, more needs to be done. EU member states should urgently fulfil their pledges to relocate unaccompanied children and put family unity at the heart of their asylum policies, allowing all children with family elsewhere in Europe, to join their relatives and grow up with their family. Sadly, in 2020, 3/4 of all family reunification requests of unaccompanied children in Greece were rejected by other EU countries.¹²

The International Rescue Committee (IRC) has been providing child protection services for asylum-seekers, refugees and other migrants in Greece since 2016. Based on this work, as well as relevant protection and migration programming around the world, we believe that durable solutions that better address the needs and safeguard the rights of unaccompanied children must be urgently introduced or expanded. These in-

“ Here, everything is difficult. For everyone, but especially refugee children like me, alone. ”

Ahmed*, 16, unaccompanied child from Afghanistan, resident of an IRC-run SIL apartment



➤ Unaccompanied children are often forced to make dangerous journeys to reach their relatives in Europe.

clude, as a priority, swifter family reunification for children with family members elsewhere in Europe; relocation to other European countries, ideally through a more permanent EU-wide relocation mechanism; resourced and effective foster care for younger children; and the increased provision of supported independent living accommodation for children over 16 years of age.

Supported yet independent accommodation is a community-based-care and protection model for largely self-sufficient adolescents, based on the provision of safe housing and individualised support with a view to supporting residents' gradual and sustained autonomy.

Considering that more than 90% of the unaccompanied children in Greece are over 14 years of age, and the largest percentage are 16 years or older, the importance of the SIL apartments model is evident. However, for this model to achieve its full potential in helping unaccompanied children transition smoothly into adulthood and integrate into society, serious gaps must be addressed. The Greek state needs to resolve serious issues affecting children's access to the asylum procedure, health care, and education, as well as their representation by guardians, as they are separated from their parents.

“There are many cases where the journey to protection for unaccompanied children does not end with their entry into Greece, but where their arrival instead marks yet another difficult struggle for survival. Upon entering Greece, they may experience homelessness, remain in detention in police stations for long periods of time, or live in precarious conditions, such as refugee camps with adults. They often don't have access to health care, education, and basic goods and commodities that society should provide to every child not only for their wellbeing, but as their rights.”

Marina Theodorou, Social Worker, working in IRC-run SIL apartments

INTRODUCTION

This report aims to highlight the importance of strengthening the multiple durable solutions available for unaccompanied children in Greece. These include family reunification for children with family elsewhere in Europe, relocation to other European countries, enhanced foster care support for younger children, and the provision of supported independent living (SIL) options for children over 16 years of age.

Globally, large-scale institutional¹³ care is now largely recognised as one of the main causes of institutional neglect of children and is no longer considered an appropriate model of care for children's emotional, psychological, or physical development. Safe, age-appropriate, non-institutional accommodation is key to better enabling unaccompanied children to feel secure, supported and to integrate into their new communities during their time in Greece.

As the overwhelming majority of unaccompanied children in Greece are over the age of 16, this report presents the SIL model as a critically important form of accommodation provision for 16–18-year-old adolescents. Detailing its benefits, this report also outlines the multiple challenges to effectively implementing the SIL accommodation model in Greece. The reality is that unaccompanied children will not be able to properly benefit from this best-practice approach and realise their full potential until serious shortcomings related to the asylum procedure, guardianship, access to health care and education are addressed, and long-term, sustainable funding for SILs is secured.

The increased arrivals of refugees in Greece in 2015–2016 highlighted the gaps within the country's child protection system and forced the Greek state to take steps to address them. One of the key challenges was the lack of available accommodation, which created serious risks for unaccompanied refugee children. The measures eventually taken to protect these children resulted in a better system overall, for the benefit of all children in Greece. This includes the ratification of legislation on adoption, foster care, supported independent living and guardianship in 2018,¹⁴ for example. However, the full implementation of these laws is not yet a reality but remains necessary to ensure that children can fully benefit from their legal rights and options for a better future.

While significant steps have been taken to address many shortcomings in the protection of unaccompanied children over the last six years, serious gaps remain. Yet, today Greece is at a point where policy makers and politicians can now look ahead and better plan for the future of not only unaccompanied children but also other children in need of protection. At the same time, the responsibility of the wider European Union towards these children remains critical, including in terms of putting family unity at the heart of its asylum policies, as well as in upholding and expanding its commitments to relocate unaccompanied children from Greece.

Section 1 of this report outlines IRC's child protection services across the world and in Greece. Section 2 briefly describes the context for the protection of unaccompanied children in Greece, while Section 3 looks at all the accommodation options provided since 2016. Section 4 then describes the framework for supported independent living in Greece, analysing its multiple benefits and challenges. This section also provides information and data from the IRC-run SIL apartments in the country. It goes on to highlight the positive impacts on the overall child protection system in Greece as a result of the presence of increased numbers of unaccompanied children, including the introduction of the SIL model to the wider childcare system for children without parental care, living in childcare institutions. Section 5 highlights EU-wide responsibility for unaccompanied children and stresses the importance of family reunification and relocation.

Finally, the report makes recommendations to the Greek government, the European Commission and EU Member States, to improve the protection of unaccompanied children, developed as a result of the IRC extensive programming experience, growing global best-practice, as well as from feedback sought and provided by children in relation to available accommodation options.

Report Methodology

The findings in this report are based on quantitative and qualitative data gathered by the IRC across a period of 10 months, from December 2020 to September 2021.

Interviews were held with unaccompanied children who live in IRC SIL apartments, to ensure that children whose lives are directly impacted by national policies and service provision are able to share their experience and influence programme design and policy recommendations. Interviews were also held with SIL staff working for the IRC and other NGOs, as well as with representatives of the Special Secretariat for the Protection of Unaccompanied Minors of the Ministry of Migration and Asylum and of the Child and Family Protection Department of the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs.

The IRC gathered qualitative data on the SIL apartments operated in Greece by both the IRC and other NGOs, between December 2020 to September 2021. Semi-structured individual interviews were conducted with 18 people, including state employees, staff working for NGOs and five children living in IRC SIL apartments. Interviews were carried out in Greek, English or native languages through an interpreter, ensuring cultural sensitivity. All people interviewed gave informed verbal or written consent. They were advised of the purpose of the research, of the voluntary nature of the interview, and that they could refuse to be interviewed, decline to answer any questions, or terminate the interview at any point. The names of children interviewed have all been changed to pseudonyms, to protect their privacy.

Information used for this report also came from the quarterly satisfaction surveys conducted with the children living in the IRC SIL apartments and the general data collected by the IRC Monitoring & Evaluation department, with full respect to the protection of personal data. The IRC believes that child participation is key to ensure that children are directly involved in influencing programmatic decisions and policy changes.



IRC's child protection programmes in Greece and beyond

The IRC has long-standing child protection experience in Greece and across the world. The IRC's child protection programmes ensure that children are safe and cared for, and can exercise their rights, ideally in a family or family-like environment that promotes their physical, social, emotional, cognitive, and economic well-being. To achieve this, we work closely with social workers, families, communities, civil society, non-governmental organisations, and government structures as well as children, to ensure that they are involved in decision-making processes. Everything we do is underpinned by thorough research and evaluation, with the IRC participating in global discussions on effective child protection practices.

To achieve change in the lives of children, IRC adopts three core approaches: immediate protection; creation of protective environments in the home; and community strengthening systems. The IRC is the co-lead to the Global Child Protection Case Management Task Force and the Global Task Force for Unaccompanied and Separated Children. The IRC Child Protection unit has developed numerous case management tools and training materials, which are used all around the world in diverse settings.¹⁵

In Greece, the IRC has been implementing child protection programmes since 2016, and currently employs 45 child protection professionals. From 2016 to 2018, the IRC supported over 400 vulnerable unaccompanied children through two 'safe zones' in refugee camps in Athens and Northern Greece. Moreover, we offered child protection case management services to over 1,000 vulnerable children and supported over 12,000 children in 'Safe Healing and Learning Spaces'¹⁶ in four refugee camps.

In August 2019, in cooperation with UNICEF, the IRC began operating five supported independent living (SIL) apartments with a total of 20 places, for unaccompanied children in Athens. We established internal regulations and procedures, such as accommodation agreements with beneficiaries, house rules and guidance notes for case workers, while along with other SIL actors (UNICEF, UNHCR, the National Centre for Social Solidarity (EKKA)¹⁷ and the Unit of Unaccompanied Children under the Child and Family Protection Directorate of the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs) and contributed to the development of the SIL Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) released by the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs in December 2019.¹⁸ Currently, IRC operates 14 SIL apartments in Athens, with a capacity to host 55 unaccompanied children, and one more apartment will be established in the coming months. Based on this experience, the IRC was chosen to establish the first SIL for children without parental care, living in child-care institutions, who are not unaccompanied asylum-seeking or refugee children.

Additionally, since September 2020, with funding from UNICEF, the IRC has been supporting vulnerable children and their parents in the Reception and Identification Centre on the island of Lesbos, through outreach, information provision and individualised case management, as well as through play and learning activities. We also run a 'Child Friendly Space' and a 'Mother & Baby Area' on Lesbos.

The IRC is a leading child protection actor for refugee children in Greece and has delivered trainings on topics such as effective communication with children and case management procedures and has provided coaching and supervision to 200 professionals across Greece. In partnership with the NGO Faros, we have supported homeless unaccompanied children in Athens through street work, psychosocial support, and the provision of basic needs items, and we have worked with the NGO METAdrasi in the implementation of the interim guardianship and foster care programmes.

Unaccompanied children in Greece

Refugee children are among the most vulnerable groups in emergencies, and therefore at higher risk of violence, abuse, neglect and exploitation, while on their journeys or in a camp setting.¹⁹ Unaccompanied children, i.e. refugee children who have been separated from parents or other legal or customary caregivers and travel alone, comprise a large portion of children affected by conflict, and may be subjected to the worst forms of child labour, sexual exploitation, detention and hazards brought about by mobility.²⁰

“ **There is a wound that we can close immediately by ourselves because it is dictated by the civilisation, the humanity, the sensibility and also by our tradition. I speak of the protection of the minors that are here unaccompanied, alone without anyone and without any hope. We can't let them be lost in the exploitation and the crime. These little souls of the world can't become victims of the guilty of this world. For this reason, I personally take over their case and concentrate all jurisdictions to the Prime Minister's office** ”

Kyriakos Mitsotakis, Prime Minister of Greece, 23 November 2019²¹

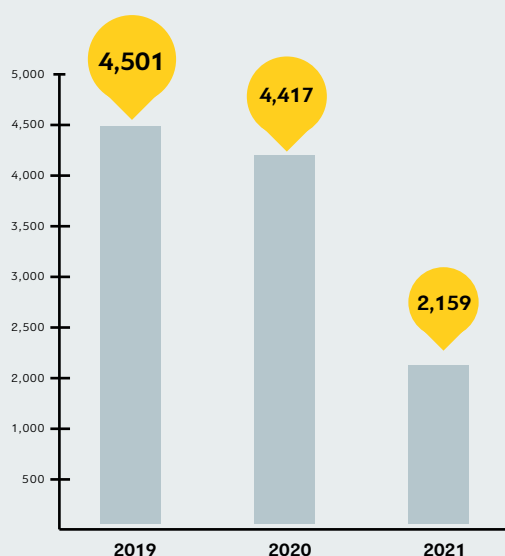
In Greece, as of 15 October 2021, there are 2,159 unaccompanied children²² who reside in various types of accommodation and receive different levels of protection and support. The number of unaccompanied children in the country has decreased significantly in the last two years (GRAPH 1), allowing for the gradual phasing out of inappropriate accommodation options. The decrease in the number of unaccompanied children in the country is mainly due to relocations from Greece to other European countries, as well as a decrease in arrivals of refugees in the last 2 years (GRAPH 2).

As of 15 October 2021, over $\frac{3}{4}$ of all unaccompanied children in Greece live in long-term accommodation structures, namely shelters and supported independent living apartments. However, still, about one in ten lives in 'safe zones' inside camps and some remain in Reception and Identification Centres (RICs) on the islands (GRAPH 3). Meanwhile, despite the legal abolition of 'protective custody' of unaccompanied children, as of 23 September 2021, there were 50 children, in detention in the RIC of Fylakio, at the land borders with Turkey.²³

Although the critical gap in unaccompanied children's access to safe accommodation has been largely addressed, there are still shortcomings in their protection. Many children continue to be deprived of basic rights and services, such as access to healthcare, education, as well as services of psycho-social and legal support. These are all compounded by the lack of continuity that short-circuits the interim guardianship programme and the delays in the implementation of the permanent nation-wide one.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child states that every child has the right to “enjoy a standard of living adequate for the child's physical, mental and social development”²⁴ and should “be able to grow up in a family environment in an atmosphere of

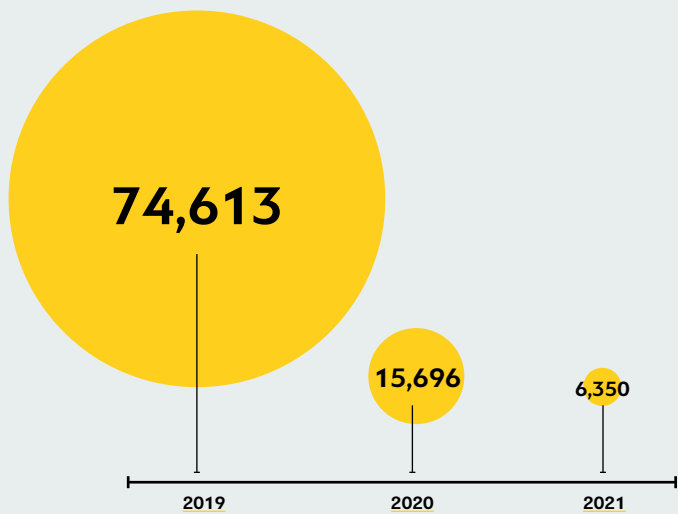
Graph 1
NUMBER OF UNACCOMPANIED CHILDREN IN GREECE



Situation Update: Unaccompanied Children in Greece, EKKA, 15 October 2021

Graph 2

REFUGEE ARRIVALS IN GREECE



Source: UNHCR, Mediterranean Situation, Greece (11/10/2021)

happiness, love and understanding”.²⁵ Family-based care through foster care can provide a family environment to children. This is especially relevant for younger children and children with health issues that cannot be addressed in other settings. The legislative framework for foster care was adopted in Greece in May 2018²⁶ but as unaccompanied children are not registered in the National Registry for Minors,²⁷ their matching process with foster families is impeded.

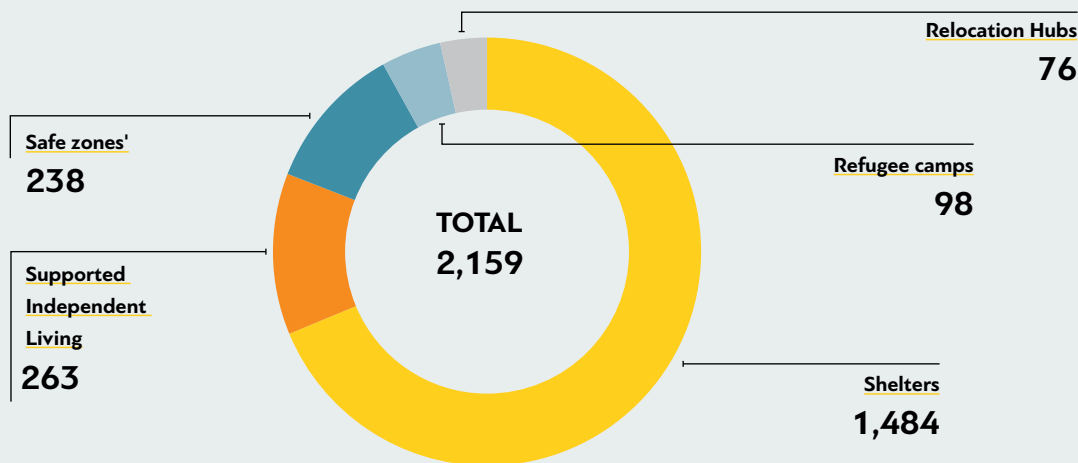
The Special Secretary for Unaccompanied Minors (SSPUAM) became the competent authority for the protection of unaccompanied asylum-seeking and refugee children in February 2020²⁸ and was eventually integrated into the Ministry of Migration and Asylum²⁹ in November of the same year. The SSPUAM has made considerable efforts to protect and promote the rights of unaccompanied children in Greece. However, as child protection in general falls under the competence of the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs,³⁰ the responsibility for child protection is now split between two Ministries. **The lack of a single authority for child protection for all the children in Greece, irrespective of their origin, can create issues of different policies and interpretations, so intense coordination between the two authorities must be further pursued.**

“The situation for unaccompanied children in Greece has improved but there are still many challenges. Children are children, irrespective of their nationality and legal status. A common, inclusive and holistic child protection framework is needed, to make sure all children in Greece have the opportunity to achieve their potential.”

Garyfallia Tsiara, IRC Child Protection Manager

Graph 3

NUMBER OF UNACCOMPANIED CHILDREN IN GREECE PER TYPE OF ACCOMMODATION, OCTOBER 2021



Situation Update: Unaccompanied Children in Greece, EKKA, 15 October 2021

Accommodation for unaccompanied children

The increased arrivals of refugees in Greece in 2015-2016 created serious protection concerns for unaccompanied refugee children, especially due to the lack of safe and age-appropriate accommodation to host them. This led to the creation of unsuitable housing structures, such as 'safe zones' in refugee camps across the Greek mainland³¹ and accommodation in hotels, while many children were living alone, were homeless or they were even forced to prolonged stay in detention.³² Both 'safe zones' and hotels were established as temporary and emergency measures so unaccompanied children would not stay for prolonged time in RICs or in detention. Despite considerable improvements in the provision of quality accommodation and care arrangements, the various types of accommodation, make effective protection for many of these children, a lottery.

As of 15 October 2021, 238 unaccompanied children were hosted in in 'safe zones' inside refugee camps, which were supposed to be temporary, for stays of up to three months. 'Safe zones' were initially designed to bridge the gap until a place in a shelter was made available. However, due to the lack of places in shelters, children have been forced to stay there for months, even years. Many of these children never had the chance to receive proper care arrangements and reached adulthood within 'safe zones'.³³ There, they were exposed to harassment, violation and danger,³⁴ living among the general population of the camp and thus in an environment that poses security risks and cannot be easily safeguarded.

In 2018, hotels also started being used as temporary accommodation. At the height of the protection crisis, on 15 May 2019, 623 unaccompanied children lived in hotels,³⁵ which could not offer the protection and care needed as they do not provide a stable environment.

In combination with their short-term nature, educational activities and, more broadly, psychosocial support, were very difficult to provide. The last children hosted in hotels were recorded in August 2021.³⁶

The most common form of accommodation for unaccompanied children in Greece is shelters, which are institution-type facilities that host 30-40 children. There are currently 65 shelters in Greece, with a total of 1,725 places where 1,484 children are hosted, 68,7% of all unaccompanied children in Greece.³⁷ Children in shelters attend school, as well as educational and recreational activities that support their developmental and psychosocial wellbeing. They are supported by a team of trained staff composed of caretakers, social workers, psychologists, and lawyers. Still, shelters are institutions that cater for a large number of children, who often receive limited individual attention.³⁸ Children do not learn to live autonomously, as they are under 24/7 watch, with limited staff to help them develop their individual skills. Large scale institutional care is too often

preferred over other forms of care arrangements, despite the general recognition among experts and practitioners that such arrangements can often result in abuse, violence, criminal activities, and severe psychological distress.³⁹ Indeed, the psychosocial impact of this predominantly institutional care model on children with heightened emotional and psychological needs should not be underestimated, while, for many adolescents, this form of care does not correspond

to their age, developmental stage, or culture.⁴⁰ Moreover, long term institutionalisation can result in children leaving institutional care at the age of 18, with limited access to higher education, employment opportunities and a stable support network.⁴¹

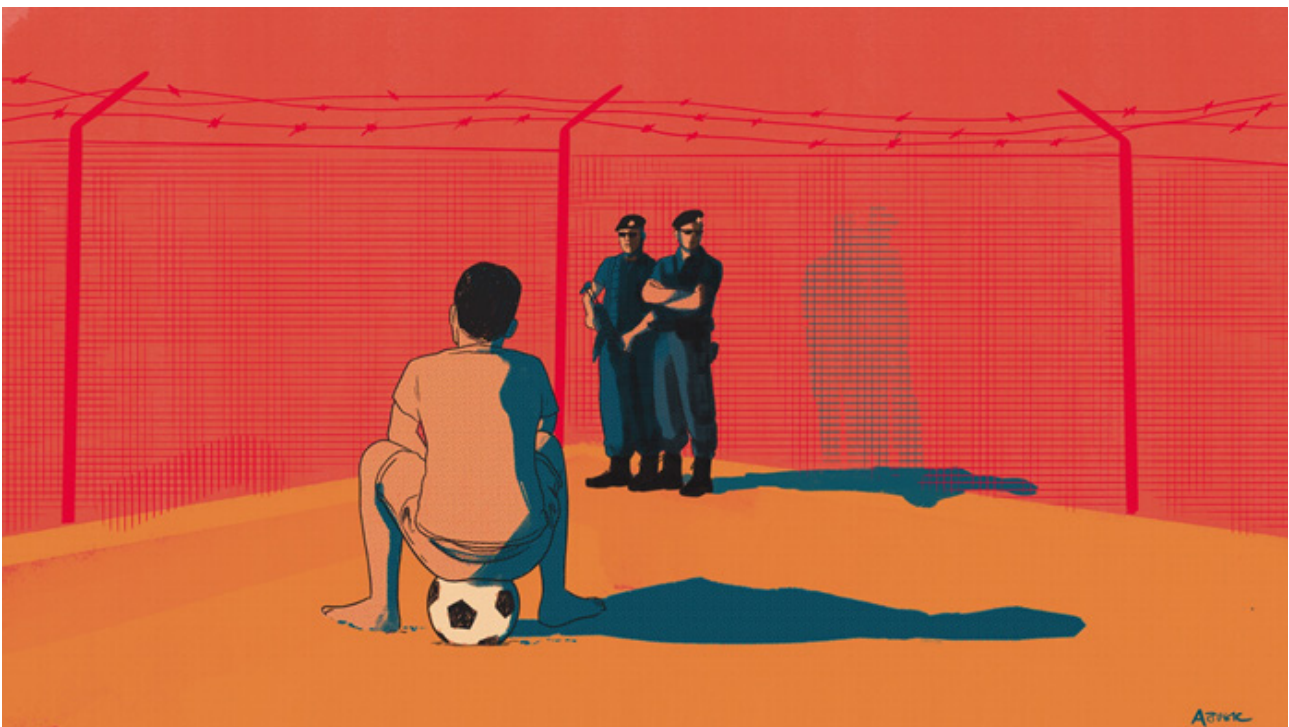
Supported independent living apartments for highly autonomous unaccompanied refugee and asylum-seeking teenagers from 16 to 18 is a durable solution, as it promotes integration. Children's skills are enhanced so that they are better prepared for their transition into adulthood and their integration into Greek society. Their implementation in Greece is based on good practices from other European countries, such as Italy, the Netherlands, and the UK,⁴² with similar numbers and profiles of unaccompanied children.

“ **They told me next week you are going to a shelter. Then it was next week and the next week. I was in prison for 4 months.** ”

Bahar*, 17, unaccompanied child from Bangladesh, resident of an IRC-run SIL apartment

Despite the increase in accommodation places and the abolition of detention in November 2020,⁴³ a significant number of unaccompanied children in Greece still find themselves outside of the support system. They can still be placed under 'protective custody', in small, overcrowded, and unsanitary police station cells of detention centres.⁴⁴ In 2019, the European Court on Human Rights condemned Greece for the protective custody of children in successive judgments⁴⁵ and this practice ended. The format of the bi-weekly situation updates on unaccompanied children, provided by the Greek government, changed in September 2021, and the number of children in detention is no longer documented. However, data from Child Protection coordination meetings show that 50 unaccompanied children were in detention in Fylakio RIC, on 23 September 2021.⁴⁶

The National Tracing and Protection Mechanism for Unaccompanied Children⁴⁷ that live on the street— a joint government, UN and NGO initiative to provide an alternative to 'protective custody' and as a response of providing first screening and care for homeless children was launched in April 2021. 'Safe zones' in two refugee camps with a total capacity of 60 places were designated as transit facilities, where children can get their asylum claim lodged, have their initial Best Interest Assessment conducted, go through the medical examinations and an age assessment procedure, if necessary. The Mechanism includes a 24/7 telephone hotline for identifying and tracing children in need, available in six languages. **Between April and September 2021, the Mechanism received 794 calls, out of which 598 concern accommodation requests.**⁴⁸



➤ Despite the abolition of detention of unaccompanied children in Greece in November 2020, they can still be placed under 'protective custody', in small, overcrowded, and unsanitary police station cells or detention centres.



Supported Independent Living (SIL)

Supported independent living apartments offer an alternative, non-institutional type of accommodation and provision of care to unaccompanied adolescents over 16 years old. Their framework in Greece was established in 2018 and the rules for their operation were defined in 2020.⁴⁹

SIL apartments must be in residential areas, with easy access to public transport, schools, health facilities and recreational activities. Each apartment may accommodate up to four children and no more than two children per bedroom. Boys and girls are placed in different apartments but, if in their best interests, as in the case of siblings, exceptionally, children of different sexes may be accommodated together. SILs can be operated by national authorities, legal entities providing social care services and civil society organisations. As of 15 October 2021, there were 122 SIL apartments across Greece. Teenagers referred to SILs must be either applicants or

beneficiaries of international protection. They must be able to take care of themselves and take on responsibilities inside the apartment. Children with severe mental health issues who may put themselves or other persons at risk, or children who use substances, such as drugs and alcohol, are not eligible for SILs. In this context, other proper care arrangements must be developed for the protection and well-being of these children.

The teenagers in the SILs are supported by a team of professionals, including social workers, caretakers, educators, interpreters, and lawyers. The social workers monitor the situation of the children, encourage their active participation in the preparation of their individual action plan and initiatives that will help their gradual empowerment and integration. The caretakers act as the daily reference person for the children and visit the SILs every day to support and encourage peaceful co-existence. They provide psychosocial support, help children develop the necessary skills to take care of themselves and to handle the challenges in their daily life, and provide various recreational activities. The educators provide lessons of Greek or other languages, according to specific needs and wants of the children, and support them with their homework, if needed. The interpreters facilitate the communication with team members and public services, while the lawyers undertake the legal representation and assistance of the



➤ Unaccompanied children have hopes and dreams, just like any other adolescent, but their main hope is to reunite with family members.

children, when needed. The lawyers are also in direct communication with the guardians, where they have been appointed, and the social workers, to avoid conflicting actions, overlapping or omissions before judicial, administrative, or other authorities.

The main objective of the SILs is to ensure an adequate framework of protection and personalised care, the smooth transition into adulthood and the integration of unaccompanied children into society, considering the needs and strengths of each child. These objectives are achieved by providing accommodation and care services to the children, in a way that respects and enhances freedom of movement and expression, respect for dignity, recognition of individual worth, the safeguarding of independence, the best interest of the child and the provision of opportunities for the development of skills.

a. Benefits of supported independent living (SIL) arrangements

“ I believe that SIL is the best way to help unaccompanied children because it supports their integration and smooth transition into adulthood. This model does not offer ready-made solutions to these children. Instead, they are supported to take responsibility for their actions and their lives. ”

Elena Giga, IRC SIL Senior Officer

The EU guidelines on alternative care,⁵⁰ the Council of Europe's recommendation on the rights of children⁵¹ and the successful models implemented in the EU,⁵² all present SIL as an effective model that provides adolescents with housing, support services and semi-autonomy. This is corroborated by IRC's own experience in Greece, which shows that investment in SILs can positively impact the lives of children and contributes to a shift in provision of services from institutional to community based. SILs can prevent segregation and social exclusion and foster integration and the right to independent living.⁵³ Moreover, they support the transition into adulthood, which often means losing a number of rights, and a period of uncertainty, especially for unaccompanied children.

“ In the apartment, I feel I have the maximum support I could have. All the people here are really helpful and encourage me. I feel very safe here. ”

Diric*, 17, unaccompanied child from Somalia, resident of an IRC-run SIL apartment

The main aim of the SILs is to provide a safe environment to develop and sustain a children's ability to live as independently as possible, a step towards ending dependent life in care and a step closer towards fully independent living. A child-centred approach is what makes the SIL project a more sustainable solution.

Supported independent living in apartments is also more cost-effective and sustainable than institutional care. According to the tender published by the Greek Ministry of Migration and Asylum for the funding of SILs under the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF) the cost for each child in SILs varies but cannot exceed 50.5 euros per day.⁵⁴ The SILs operated by the IRC for example, are funded by AMIF with 48.40 euros per day, per child. In contrast, the respective tender for shelters allows 68 euros per child, per day,⁵⁵ a cost 34% higher than the top cost for SILs. Therefore, not only are SILs better for the children, but they are also more economical.

b. Challenges in the implementation of the SIL model in Greece

Despite the benefits of SILs, there are several gaps and shortcomings in their implementation in Greece, identified through the IRC experience and the interviews conducted for this report, which hamper the full potential of this model.

CHALLENGES IN THE IMPLEMENTATION OF SIL IN GREECE

- Lack of sustainable and long-term funding
- Lack of referrals of children
- Non-appointment of guardians
- Asylum procedure shortcomings
- Impeded access to healthcare
- Limited access to education
- Lack of accommodation options for 18+

An important challenge is the **lack of sustainable, long-term funding and delays in the disbursement of funds**. Poor planning, such as last-minute notification of calls and funding extensions for state-managed AMIF funding have been reported by implementing partners. This makes it difficult to prepare proposals, as the requirements are often complex and time-consuming. In addition, the state-managed AMIF funds to the organisations operating the SILs have not always been disbursed in a timely manner, leaving large gaps that the organisations are forced to cover in order to pay expenses. The complexity of bureaucratic procedures in the financial management of the partnerships with the national AMIF managing authorities, has led to significant delays in cash flow and to reservations by NGOs to submit proposals for opening new facilities under the same funding scheme. In addition, the unit cost method of payment, based on occupancy, has proven to be ineffective for the organisations running SILs. To begin with, the unit cost has not been calculated on a realistic basis but, more importantly, the fact that organisations are funded on occupancy means that de facto, they cannot cover their costs, such as rent and bills, when not operating on full capacity, which they often have to, through no fault of their own.

Another barrier to unaccompanied children accessing SIL care is **the lack of referrals of children to the SILs**. As a result, there is a large number of empty places, despite the pressing need for accommodation. For instance, on 15 October 2021, there were 496 places in SILs across Greece, but only 263 children hosted.⁵⁶ One of the reasons is that the state-managed AMIF funding system for shelters, which is also based solely on occupancy, might trigger reluctance for shelters to refer children to SILs, as this will directly impact their funding situation and possibly create a gap in funding. Moreover, the organisations that operate shelters are not obliged to assist and prepare children to be referred to SIL apartments. Another reason for the limited referrals is that some children do not fulfil the criteria to participate in this scheme, as they may have mental health issues, or may be unwilling to change living environment and adjust to a new setting.

A critical gap in the protection of unaccompanied children in Greece, in SILs and elsewhere, is the **non-appointment of guardians**, legal representatives for children whose parents are unable to represent them and their best interests. In 2018, the relevant legislation was adopted⁵⁷ but unfortunately, to date, this law has not been implemented.⁵⁸ Social workers in SILs receive the permission to perform some acts of guardianship, such as access the children's medical files or enrol them to school, while SIL lawyers can support the children with their cases, as long as the children are in the SILs. However, these professionals cannot substitute the need for a guardian, who should be the main focal point of a child from arrival until adulthood. For now, the Public Prosecutor for Minors acts as a temporary guardian for children seeking asylum. However, the Public Prosecutor is responsible for hundreds of unaccompanied children in Greece and doesn't have the capacity to follow up the daily and specific needs the children may have. This results in children not having the care and attention that they need to thrive.

In September 2021, the responsibility of guardianship and representation of unaccompanied children was transferred from the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, which is responsible for child protection in general, to the Ministry of Migration and Asylum.⁵⁹ So far, NGOs have been bridging the gap until the guardianship law is implemented but due to delays in tenders⁶⁰ there is lack of continuity, which short-circuits this interim programme, with a serious impact on unaccompanied children's rights.⁶¹ The current cessation of the interim guardianship programme left a gap in the legal

representation and initial registration with the authorities of newly-arrived unaccompanied children on Lesbos and Samos.⁶²

Another key challenge is the **asylum procedure**, starting from shortcomings in the initial registration, which have stripped many unaccompanied children of their rights. For example, border authorities have registered children as adults because they either did not have the required identification documents or were unaware that they should present them.⁶³ Throughout the asylum procedure, children should be provided with information about their rights, the asylum procedure and available services in a child-sensitive and age- and context-appropriate manner.⁶⁴ The experience in Greece has repeatedly shown that serious capacity shortages of staff,⁶⁵ combined with a lack of legal assistance, can lead to considerable delays and grave mistakes during age assessments.⁶⁶ As a result, unaccompanied children can be placed among adults, deprived of their rights. Children have special reception needs and must be provided with special reception conditions,⁶⁷ an essential component in ensuring they can effectively access asylum procedures to exercise their right to asylum as well as ensuring their well-being and dignity are protected.

Unaccompanied children who have close family⁶⁸ in other EU member states have the right to join them, through a **family reunification** procedure.⁶⁹ Family reunification requests of unaccompanied children with family members present in another EU country have been affected by the delay of the implementation of the guardianship system in Greece⁷⁰ because the Public Prosecutor for Minors, as the temporary guardian of all the unaccompanied children residing in the Greek territory⁷¹ has no capacity to address all the family reunification requests. Furthermore, progressively Member States have put more layers and obstacles in accepting the requests.

Access to healthcare is often another critical gap in the protection of unaccompanied children, who, due to their previous experiences may suffer physical and mental health consequences of violence, trauma, and loss.⁷² While free access to health services and medical care is provided by law,⁷³ practical obstacles have hindered access,⁷⁴ except for medical emergencies where children are normally able to receive urgent medical attention. These obstacles include the lack of interpretation at hospitals but mainly, the difficulties in obtaining a social security number,⁷⁵ the de facto require-

ment for accessing the public healthcare system. Following the abolition of the standard social security number for asylum seekers in July 2019, which resulted in months of limbo⁷⁶ for thousands of people, a new scheme was created in January 2020, PAAYPA (Foreigner's Temporary Insurance and Health Coverage Number⁷⁷). However, PAAYPA is linked to an active asylum applicant card so, whenever there are issues with or delays in the renewals of the asylum cards -very common, especially during COVID-19 related closures of the Asylum Service- PAAYPA does not work and therefore, no medicine, exams or treatment can be obtained free of charge. There have been various cases where, during scheduled medical appointments, unaccompanied children in the IRC SILs with expired applicant cards, through no fault of their own, were asked to pay for hospital services.

“ **My uncle said he cares for me, so the lawyer applied for the family reunification. The Asylum Service said they didn't believe this was my uncle. So, my uncle asked them what they needed to prove we were related and brought a family certificate from Bangladesh. But it was not accepted. They rejected our request. I have more cousins in England, here nothing, I am alone.** ”

Bahar*, 17, unaccompanied child from Bangladesh, resident of an IRC-run SIL apartment

Attending school is a stabilising factor in the unsettled lives of young refugees but **access to education** also remains a challenge.⁷⁸ According to Greek law,⁷⁹ asylum-seeking children are required to attend primary and secondary school under the public education system under similar conditions as Greek children. However, out of a total of 44,000 refugee children estimated to be in Greece,⁸⁰ less than 20,000 (aged 4-17) were enrolled in education for the school year 2020-2021.⁸¹ Unaccompanied children in IRC programmes face significant obstacles to enrol in high school, as this is normally done online, using the tax codes of the child's parents or guardians. The enrolment of unac-





➤ Unaccompanied children in SIL apartments are encouraged to become independent and transition smoothly into adulthood. Cooking is one of the most important life skills needed to achieve this.

Unaccompanied children without a guardian is exceptionally done using either the tax codes of the IRC SIL social workers or those of the school principals, although there is no legal basis for this but is rather at the discretion of each school principal. Children living in IRC SIL apartments have also reported difficulties in the 'reception' classes, as there is no segregation by the level of the Greek, leaving some children unable to follow and some bored. The specialised attention and care the children receive at SILs, means that, 68 out of the 73 have enrolled and regularly attend school, despite the obstacles encountered.

A further serious issue is the **lack of accommodation options for adolescents reaching adulthood**. The legal framework for SILs⁸² stipulates that children can stay there strictly until they are 18 years old⁸³ and from then on are fully responsible to cover all their basic needs. Alarming, however, there are no public schemes in place to support young adults who have left care – not for housing, job readiness and livelihood trainings, financial aid or mental health support.

“ **For the last couple of months, I'm stressed about how my life is going to be, if I have a rejection. I am thinking those things. There are some difficulties in life and when you have difficult challenges, you can't think of hobbies, and stuff like that.** ”

Yusuf*, 16, unaccompanied child from Somalia resident of an IRC-run SIL apartment

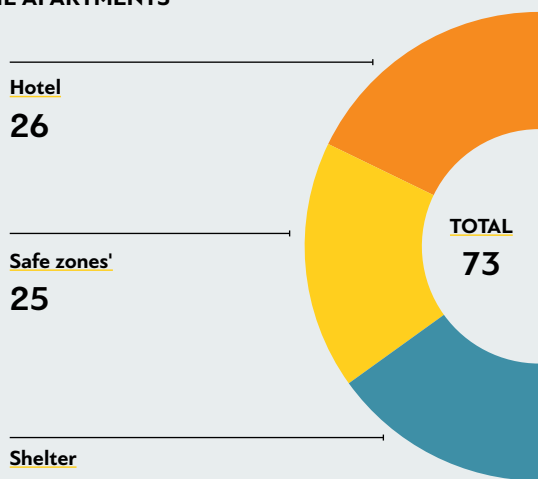
c. IRC-run SIL apartments for asylum seeking and refugee children

Since August 2019, IRC has been operating SIL apartments in the centre of Athens. When adolescents are accepted in an IRC apartment, both parties sign an agreement. Children are required to attend the courses they are enrolled in and those included in the Individual Action Plan they have drafted with their social worker. They must follow the weekly cleaning programme and respect the house equipment, live peacefully with, and respect their flat mates, respect their personal belongings and participate in monthly meetings. They must return to the apartment at the ap-

pointed time, and they are not allowed to invite friends or relatives without informing the staff and their flat mates. Smoking is forbidden indoors, and the consumption of alcohol and illegal substances is strictly prohibited.

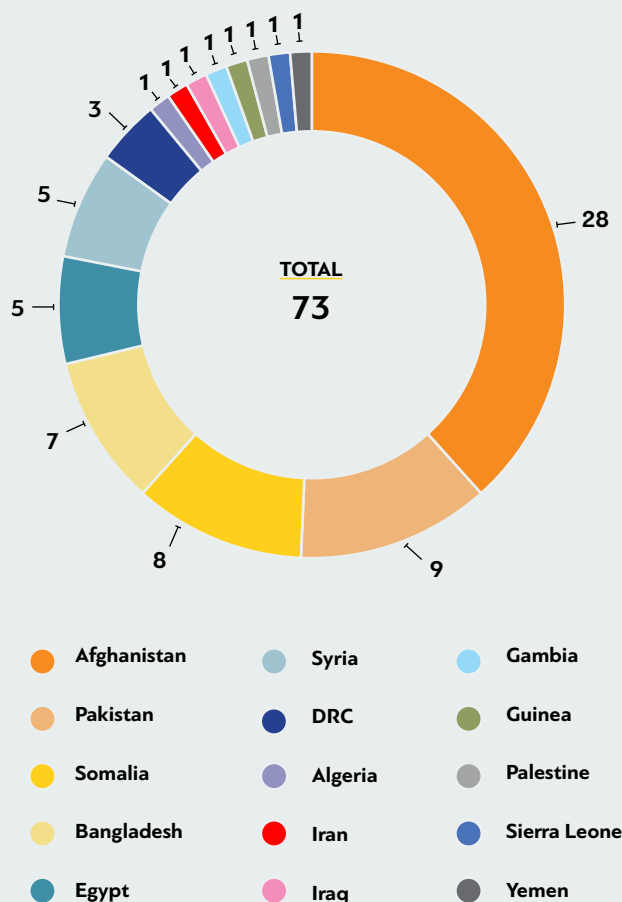
The IRC currently operates 14 SIL apartments and offers services to 25 unaccompanied children. Nine apartments are under the FUTURA project, with a tenth one on the way, supported by the Asylum and Migration programme of the EEA and Norway Grants⁸⁴ under the outcome for 'addressing urgent needs for the reception and screening of asylum seekers and for the accommodation of vulnerable groups'. Five apartments are supported by the National Programme of the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF).⁸⁵ Since the beginning of our SIL operation, 73 children have been supported in Athens.

Graph 4
ACCOMMODATION PRIOR TO PLACEMENT IN IRC SIL APARTMENTS



The IRC regularly conducts satisfaction surveys with the children in the apartments, to ensure that they are able to raise complaints, provide feedback and are involved in decision-making processes that affect their lives. Feedback is anonymous in order to ensure children feel they are able to express themselves.

Graph 5
NATIONALITY OF UNACCOMPANIED CHILDREN IN IRC SIL APARTMENTS NOVEMBER 2019-SEPTEMBER 2021



“These children come from very difficult conditions, war, violence, financial difficulties, they do not have the right to education, they are not treated equally, their lives may be in danger. When they join a SIL programme, such as the FUTURA project, they are given an opportunity.”

Katerina Retzou, IRC SILs Unit Coordinator



d. Pilot of SIL apartments for children in residential care

The presence of a large number of unaccompanied children forced the Greek state to address child protection gaps and the measures taken, resulted in a better system overall, for the benefit of all children in Greece. This includes the ratification of legislation on guardianship, adoption and foster care, and supported independent living.

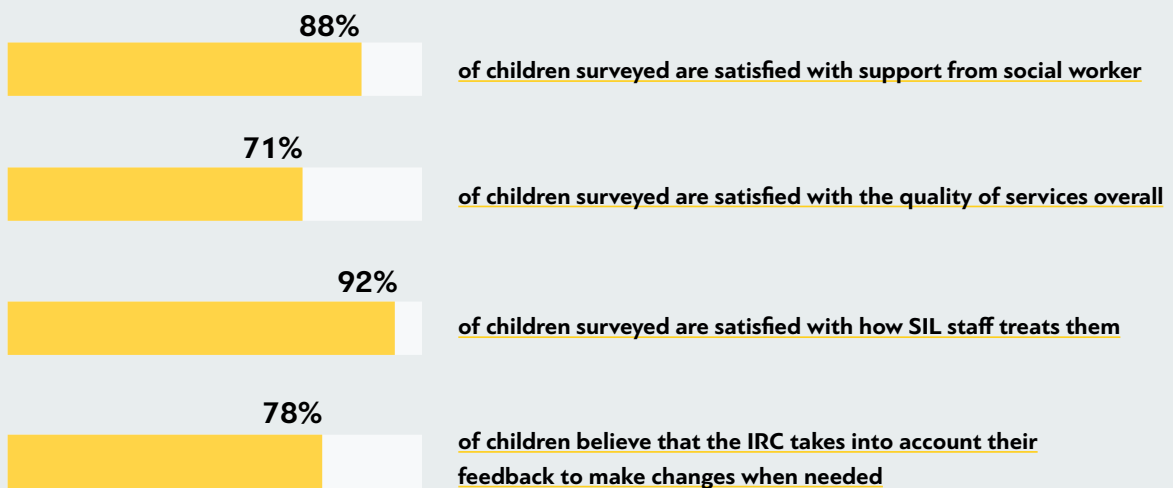
The establishment of the legislative framework for supported independent living, allowed phase III of the joint UNICEF- European Commission 'Child Guarantee' project⁸⁶ to introduce this model for non-refugee children, too. IRC Hellas was chosen as the implement-

ing partner of the third pillar of the project in Greece: 'Introducing supported independent living to support children's transition to adulthood' and is currently preparing the ground by analysing the regulatory framework, assessing the needs of children, and drafting the Standard Operating Procedures, ahead of the implementation, with the support of UNICEF. The experience gained from the operation of SILs for unaccompanied children, with the challenges and lessons learned, are valuable earnings that are adapted as appropriate, and inform this new framework.

The SILs for unaccompanied children have therefore paved the way for the expansion of this model to all children and contributed to the provision of accommodation outside of institutions.

Graph 6

RESULTS OF SATISFACTION SURVEYS CONDUCTED IN IRC-RUN SIL APARTMENTS



European responsibility for unaccompanied children

Managing migration in a more humane, fair, and sustainable manner is an EU-wide issue and should be dealt with as such. The European Commission and the European Parliament have consistently called on EU Member States to prioritise and significantly increase relocation of the most vulnerable asylum seekers and refugees in Greece,⁸⁷ including unaccompanied children, as a group exposed to particular risks and dangers, across the EU, but also to improve family reunification systems.⁸⁸

Through the voluntary **relocation** scheme from Greece to other European countries, 1,047 unaccompanied children, which is close to two thirds of the total 1,600 pledges from EU member states, have been relocated between April 2020 and 19 October 2021.⁸⁹ This is a very welcome initiative, which shows what can be achieved when there is real solidarity and political will. Going forward, it is crucial that the remaining pledges are fulfilled.

Moreover, to make this initiative more effective, a European relocation coordinator, with national counterparts, should be appointed to promote and facilitate relocations, liaise with relocating and relocation countries, and ensure SOPs are respected. The experience of the relocation procedure for unaccompanied children residing in IRC-run SILs, has shown strict and often unattainable criteria imposed by Member States regarding the age, nationality and gender of the children they want to relocate. This reduced access to relocations, complicated the matching process, created delays and confusion, and led to several children 'ageing out' of relocation eligibility. The complex coordination between different stakeholders, including guardians, international organisations and government officials, the need to navigate conflicting

timeframes and the need to communicate with receiving states on the necessary preparations and investments, pose further challenges, which greater EU-wide guidance and coordination could address.

Family reunification of unaccompanied children with their adult family members present in other European countries is another durable solution.⁹⁰ In 2020, in the context of COVID-19 travel restrictions, challenges in family reunification procedures were exacerbated,⁹¹ as there were inevitable delays in the transfers of people accepted for reunification. The strict administrative timeframe was even more difficult to respect, both due to the overall slowdown of the asylum system and the impossibility of preparing the substantial documentation required to support requests. As a result, the right to family life was severely impacted. Beyond COVID-19, other longstanding limitations on access to family

reunification include delays in conducting any requested DNA tests, a lack of updated contact details for the children concerned, which then results in delays in the submission of documents, insufficient legal aid and interpretation both regarding the reunification procedure and the necessary documents,⁹² and finally, significant delays from the Greek Asylum Service in subcontracting a travel agency to process flight tickets for those accepted for family reunification. The lack of a contract with a travel agency

resulted in serious delays as well as unnecessary stress for the children.⁹³ Consequently, family reunification requests were rejected on purely administrative or rather spurious grounds, such as delays on the side of Greece, or even citing a 'break in the family link' for families with children that have been apart for a long period. Indicatively, in 2020, only 469 unaccompanied children in Greece were allowed to join their family elsewhere in Europe, compared to 823 who were not. This means that 74% or 3/4 of all family reunification requests of unaccompanied children in Greece were rejected by other EU Member States.⁹⁴ The suspension of reunification can have an extremely negative impact on the child who are prevented from being with their relatives.

“ **I only have bad dreams here (in Greece). I am afraid of the police. In Germany, I will not be afraid. I will have my brother with me. He will help me.**”

Ahmed*, 16, unaccompanied child from Afghanistan, resident of an IRC-run SIL apartment

CONCLUSION

Greece has made significant improvements in its approach to protecting and supporting unaccompanied children, including through the provision of increased models of accommodation. This, in turn, has had a positive impact on the availability of more appropriate services for all children in Greece, irrespective of their origins.

The legislation and implementation of supported independent living accommodation models in particular, has been critical. This has seen a move towards the provision of quality care in family-like environments for adolescents, helping them become autonomous and transition smoothly into adulthood. Based upon the success of the tried and tested model introduced for unaccompanied children, the new pilot programme providing SIL accommodation for all children under institutional care in Greece, is one clear illustration of how much-needed improvements to child protection in the country were accelerated, as a result of the presence of refugee children arriving in Greece.

However, the full potential of the SIL model is yet to be realised. Persistent challenges remain that block this approach from fully and effectively reaching its objectives to both support adolescents to lead independent lives and provide them with individualised care. Principal among these challenges is the lack of available guardians to support children, coupled with significant delays and obstacles in the acquisition of crucial documentation. Without these, unaccompanied children cannot exercise their legal rights to effectively access the asylum procedure, including family reunification and relocation, as well as access to education and healthcare. Further limitations include the short-term and unreliable nature of the funding available, which endangers the smooth and efficient operation of SIL apartments and even places them in danger of closure. Added to this there is an absence of follow-up plans for children who reach adulthood.

It is crucial that these challenges are urgently addressed. This is critical to not only help prevent the re-traumatisation of children in care, but to also avoid their further marginalisation from wider society by depriving them from developing the skills necessary to enter the workforce and contribute to their new communities. Refugees have a lot to contribute to Greece, Europe and beyond, including socially, financially and culturally. However, they need to be supported to be able to do so when they are children or transitioning into adulthood.²⁵

While Greece must swiftly begin to better address the multiple and interconnected challenges to ensuring the safety, protection, integration, inclusion and empowerment of children, it is vital that other EU member states also greatly increase their efforts to protect unaccompanied children. Family unity must be prioritised, including expanding the definition of family, ensuring harmonised procedures in terms of documentation and best interest assessment processes, and facilitating speedier and more flexible family reunification procedures. EU member states must immediately refrain from blocking family reunification requests on administrative grounds and find creative solutions to ensure that all children stranded in Greece can join their relatives in other EU member states as swiftly as possible. The EU must also continue to push for the establishment of a permanent intra-European solidarity mechanism, centred on relocations, including in the New Pact negotiations, ensuring that they fulfil existing relocation pledges, including guaranteeing funding for the voluntary relocation scheme. Ensuring effective protection for children, including those who are without a parent or caregiver in Greece, remains both a moral imperative and a continuing test to EU values and laws. It is truly time for Greece and European leaders to take up their responsibility in providing better options for these children through the provision of more appropriate care and increased protection.

RECOMMENDATIONS

TO THE GREEK GOVERNMENT:

- Include unaccompanied children in the development of a dynamic and sustainable long-term child protection strategy, based on the best interests of the child and the provision of durable solutions.
- Further enhance cooperation between the Ministry of Migration and Asylum, the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Health, to coordinate efforts and create synergies for guardianship, foster care, accommodation programmes, access to education and access to healthcare.
- Promote, expand and resource alternative care models, such as SIL accommodation, so that children are safer, better cared for, and can exercise their rights, in a family or family-like environment that promotes their physical, social, emotional, cognitive, and economic well-being.
- Ensure long-term support for SILs by changing the funding model, so that funding is not based on how many children are hosted in each apartment but based on the hosting capacity. When funding is based on occupancy and the apartments are not at full capacity, necessary expenses such as rent, utilities and salaries of staff cannot be covered.
- Change the funding model of shelters, which is currently also based on occupancy, to improve the effectiveness of the referral mechanism to SILs. Shelters could face funding gaps if they operate at less than maximum capacity and therefore may be hesitant to refer children to SILs.
- Establish an effective permanent guardianship system and appoint guardians for unaccompanied children as soon as possible upon arrival in Greece, tasked with supporting them in all aspects of their lives, including throughout the relocation process. Until the nation-wide system is fully established, issue a tender for an interim programme, as a matter of urgency.
- Completely phase out 'safe zones' by the end of 2021, because they have proven to be unsafe and unsuitable.

- Stop the practice of keeping children in reception and identification centres or in detention, and ensure children are swiftly transferred to equipped and supported temporary shelters and SILs to prevent their exposure to prolonged distress and protect their health, safety, and wellbeing.
- Include unaccompanied children in the National Registry for Minors, so they can access foster care and be provided with alternative care that is in their best interests.
- Facilitate the integration of unaccompanied children in the education system by resolving the on-line enrolment system and provide graded reception classes so children can receive support in learning the Greek language and other subjects.
- Urgently take all measures needed to effectively include unaccompanied children in national services, such as the provision of a social security and a tax number upon registration and the timely renewal of residence permits, which would in turn allow them to access all their legal rights: healthcare, education opportunities, integration support and benefits.
- Ensure access to free legal assistance for unaccompanied children so they understand their rights and obligations and are in a better position to challenge erroneous registration of their personal data, including misregistration of their age, for instance.
- Support the transition of children into adulthood with suitable accommodation support, access to employment or higher education, and services to support the development of their skills.
- Include guardians, local authorities, NGOs, and legal representatives throughout the relocation process, from selection to ongoing support in destination countries. This should include the involvement of civil society who work with the target population daily, and can assess vulnerability and identify who is most in need of relocation.

TO THE EUROPEAN COMMISSION:

- Take all available measures, as Guardian of the Treaties, to ensure EU Member States meet their existing legal and political commitments regarding the reception, identification, protection, and family reunification of all children, particularly unaccompanied children.



- Urge EU Member States to complete the current relocation scheme, fulfilling all the pledges made.
- Ensure the continuation and funding of the voluntary relocation scheme, with pledges by individual states coordinated and structured through an extended EU scheme, until a permanent relocation mechanism as proposed in the new EU Pact on Migration and Asylum is established.
- Ensure that relocation eligibility criteria are based on vulnerability, personal ties and willingness to relocate, rather than age or gender. To achieve this, an EU coordinator should be appointed to coordinate relocations centrally, while each Member State should appoint a national relocation coordinator or focal point who has adequate resources and decision-making authority to coordinate and operationalize relocation procedures.
- Expand the definition of family for family reunification and ensure harmonised procedures in terms of documentation and best interest assessment process.
- Urge EU Member States to implement speedier and more flexible family reunification procedures in line with the EU Directives and the Dublin Regulation, having the best interest of the child as a guiding principle throughout the process.

TO EU MEMBER STATES:

- Fulfil pledges to relocate unaccompanied children from Greece and take steps to accelerate the process.
- Base relocation eligibility criteria on vulnerability, personal ties and willingness to relocate, rather than nationality, age or gender.
- Examine family reunification requests with the best interest of the child and family unity as a guiding principle and refrain from rejecting requests on administrative grounds.
- Make greater use of the discretionary clause under Article 17 of the Dublin III Regulation to reunite children with 'non-immediate' members of the family.
- Redouble efforts to create safe, legal, and effective routes into Europe for children to reunite with family, so they no longer have to make such dangerous journeys alone.



- Unaccompanied children's journey to safety can be long and full of risks of abuse and exploitation.

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A chance for a better future

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ILLUSTRATIONS

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The information in this report was correct at the time of writing, in October 2021.



IRC Hellas