



# Research & Analysis Report:

Situation and needs  
of unaccompanied minors  
and voluntary arrangements provided by  
governmental and civil society organisations



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## Project Summary

*The number of unaccompanied minors seeking asylum in the EU increased dramatically in 2015, with the latest statistics suggesting that 13,600 unaccompanied children sought asylum in the EU in the period ending 2020<sup>1</sup>. In most EU countries receiving these young people, volunteers play a significant role in the support provided.*

*European studies have found that a common challenge reported by volunteers in this field, is the lack of specialized and trained staff. The VOLUME project aims to support those volunteers who are providing services to unaccompanied minors, by developing an online training platform that will support their professional learning and ultimately, improve the outcomes for the young people with whom they are working.*

*This project brings together partners from five European countries, who are experienced in migration and integration services. Collectively, they will develop a blended learning curriculum to support the work of volunteers in this discipline.*

*More information on the project and its partner organisations can be found at [volume.vnb.de](http://volume.vnb.de).*

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<sup>1</sup> <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-eurostat-news/-/ddn-20210423-1>

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## 1. Introduction

Local reports, detailing the individual volunteer and state arrangements, from the 5 VOLUME partners have been completed, creating comparative data that has been analysed to form the basis of this report.

## 2. Aims

The aims of this report were outlined and collectively agreed by the 5 member states, these form a framework for this analysis report and are presented below:

- To gather the views of volunteers providing care and support to unaccompanied minors as part of their role.
- To better understand the successes and challenges that volunteers face in their work.
- To identify any additional training support required.
- To develop a curriculum that is relevant and fit for purpose.
- To identify common key themes identified across the member states.

## 3. Objectives

In order to achieve these aims, the following objectives have been identified:

- To develop and disseminate a questionnaire to two volunteer organisations in each member state.
- To undertake an evaluation of the data collected from the questionnaires.
- To prepare a Common Report identifying the key themes prevalent within the data.
- To outline relevant training curricula modules to meet the needs identified in the questionnaires.

## 4. Methodology

The five member states convened in December 2020, to draft a research framework outlining the aims and objectives, research questions and structure in which the project would operate. This culminated in the production of a questionnaire written to enable a comparison of training needs present within the five member states, Austria, Cyprus, England, Germany and Italy.

The questionnaire comprised two separate sections, the first was to be populated by the partner agencies involved in the VOLUME project, to provide some background information on the asylum process within each state. This information was based on the national, regional and local policies and protocols present within the individual countries and was used to form the basis of the literature review. The second questionnaire was to be completed specifically by members of the volunteering community who support unaccompanied minors, outlining their practice

arrangements and gathering information on the type of training required to better assist their role.

This report, written by Immigration Social Work Services Ltd, analyses the data collected from the five member states, identifying common training requirements detailed by the partner organisations and considers the steps required to deliver a fit for purpose online training platform.

## 5. Results of Country Reports

The results of the country reports (Part 1 of the questionnaire) are presented below, based on the headings printed in Part 1 of the original document.

### State definitions of an unaccompanied/separated minor

The European directive for Reception in the Official Journal of the European Union<sup>2</sup> defines a 'minor' as a *“third-country national or stateless person below the age of 18 years”*, and an 'unaccompanied minor' *“means a minor who arrives on the territory of the Member States unaccompanied by an adult responsible for him or her whether by law or by the practice of the Member State concerned, and for as long as he or she is not effectively taken into the care of such a person; it includes a minor who is left unaccompanied after he or she has entered the territory of the Member States”*<sup>3</sup>. The definition of unaccompanied/separated minors in the five member states participating in the VOLUME project, are broadly similar to those defined in the above journal. In Austria, Cyprus, England, Germany and Italy unaccompanied/separated minors are described as foreign nationals under the age of 18, who are not accompanied by a parent or guardian.

Country variations exist in Italy, where extended support can be applied for up to the age of 21, and in Germany where minors have legal entitlement to child and youth welfare services until they are 21, with continued support if required up to the age of 27. In England, support can be provided up until the age of 25, dependent on the minors' immigration status at the time.

### Legislative framework of Support on both national and regional frameworks

In Addition to upholding the European Directive for Reception<sup>4</sup>, all five member states have also ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), which apply to everyone under the age of 18, regardless of their immigration status. The Convention recognises the rights of children to *“grow up in the spirit of peace, dignity, tolerance, freedom, equality and solidarity”*<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32013L0033&from=EN>





<sup>3</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/what-we-do/networks/european\\_migration\\_network/glossary\\_search/unaccompanied-minor\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/what-we-do/networks/european_migration_network/glossary_search/unaccompanied-minor_en)

<sup>4</sup> <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32013L0033&from=EN>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.unicef.org/child-rights-convention/convention-text>

Ratification of the Convention does not guarantee that these rights shall be respected, as this can only be achieved when countries incorporate the principles of the UNCRC into domestic legislation.

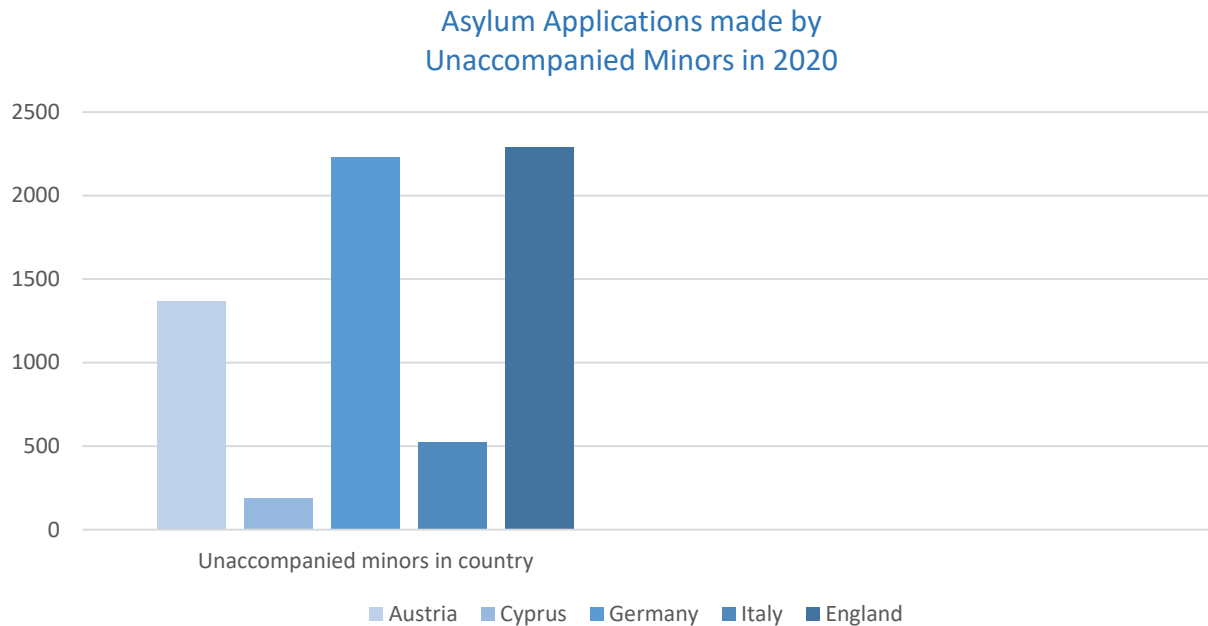
The five member states have differing legislative frameworks of support, incorporating most, if not all principles of the UNCRC. The practical arrangements of these are summarised below.

-  In Austria, unaccompanied minors are initially represented by legal counsellors before being taken into authority care. Once the asylum seeker is admitted, the legal representative becomes the Child and Youth Welfare office of the federal state in which the child or youth is accommodated. Unaccompanied minors have a four-week appeal period against the decisions made by the Federal Office for Immigration and Asylum (BFA).
-  Cyprus's monist legal system allows the country to adopt international laws without the need to make a similar national law, therefore they have adopted the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) as statute. However, there are some existing laws, like the Children's Law of 1956, that do not completely comply with the UNCRC, to rectify this disparity a new bill is currently being scrutinized that will bring the law back in line with the UNCRC. This new law will not only better protect the rights of the child but reaffirm the rights of accompanied minors.
-  In England, under the Children Act 1989, unaccompanied minors become the responsibility of the Local Authority where they were initially encountered. In Local Authorities where there are disproportionately high numbers of unaccompanied minors, the National Transfer Scheme (NTS) does allow for the legal transfer of young people from one Local Authority to another, however, this is a voluntary arrangement and there have been challenges in its implementation. All unaccompanied minors will become Looked After Children under Domestic Legislation and have the same rights and entitlements as Citizen Looked After Children. The care system runs parallel to the immigration application; however, all Children and Young People will receive services up until they are 18 years old as a minimum. The Social Work Act 2017 allows for support to continue post 18 years and up until the age of 25 but this is dependent on a young person's immigration status at the time. Young people who are Appeals Rights Exhausted (ARE) with no Leave to remain in the UK and with no further claims to be made, will have support withdrawn, with the expectation that they return to their country of origin or remain in the UK destitute and subject to the Hostile Environment Policy.
-  Germany's Child Youth Welfare Act legally binds public services on a national, regional and local level across the country. To gain residence there is a clearing procedure to find the most suitable solution for the individual.

- █ Italy has its own legislative framework that is based on the 2013 European Directive. There are three phases, first aid and assistance, followed by the first reception phase in government centres, and finally a second-line reception and integration system.

### Estimated figure of unaccompanied minors in each country

It was difficult to establish a common timeframe to calculate the population data of unaccompanied minors in each member state. Therefore, data has been taken from the Eurostat database and UK Home Office website to outline the number of asylum applications made by unaccompanied children in each member state during the year 2020.



### Immigration rights applying to unaccompanied minors in the member states

- █ Austria use their own Asylum Act, however, there are no separate regulations for unaccompanied minors present within it. Asylum applications must meet two threshold tests, the first is to establish whether the individual is “admissible”, individuals can be rejected on the grounds of safety in a third country or if they are deemed the responsibility of another state<sup>6</sup>. Secondly, once the minor is considered “admissible”, the state makes a determination of whether that person qualifies for Refugee Status. All unaccompanied minors are subject to this same process.

<sup>6</sup> <https://asylumineurope.org/reports/country/austria/asylum-procedure/general/short-overview-asylum-procedure/>



- 🇨🇵 Cyprus uses the International Convention on the Rights of the Child, therefore, unaccompanied children from conflict ridden countries have the right to international protection upon arrival. Should they be refused Refugee Status, young people will be subject to adult processes once they reach the age of maturity.
- ✚ In England, children and young people are subject to the same immigration application process as adults and families, with a few practical changes to the arrangements, such as the way interviews are conducted *etc.* If a child or young person is refused Asylum, they will be granted Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children (unaccompanied minors) leave, which enables them to remain in the UK until they are 17.5 years old or for 30 months, whichever arrives soonest. All young people are entitled to appeal these decisions; however, the appeals process can often take years, with young people stuck in limbo past their 18<sup>th</sup> birthday. Legal representation is arranged by the Local Authority. Scotland has a Guardianship Service for all unaccompanied minors, which runs parallel to the Local Authority support, however, this has not yet been implemented in England, Wales or Northern Ireland.
- 🇩🇪 In Germany, unaccompanied minors can gain immigration rights through a legal guardian, residential permission or exceptional leave to remain status via an application for residence permission or asylum. The Residence Act can also secure long term stays.
- 🇮🇹 Italy has its own laws that have strengthened the rights and protections in favour of unaccompanied minors, explicitly introducing the absolute prohibition of rejection of unaccompanied minors on the border at the reception phases. It also only allows expulsion of foreign minors if they are a public order or state security risk, on condition it does not entail a risk of serious harm to the child. Laws also make family investigations more expedite and introduce a preference of fostering over community reception placements. The local authorities are assigned the task of raising awareness and the training of foster carers to take in minors. Voluntary guardians are provided in every juvenile court to take on guardianship of the unaccompanied foreign minor.

#### Housing and care arrangements for unaccompanied minors in the five member states

- 🇦🇹 Austria's accommodation of unaccompanied minors is state regulated, with three grades of housing offered. The first is a residential group, the second a residential home and the third is supervised living. Residential groups are the most common, with supervised living more likely to be considered for more independent young people who can live in their own flats; the most appropriate form is decided by the accommodation facility.
- 🇨🇵 Similar to Austria, Cyprus's asylum seekers are accommodated in state institutions, who have legal guardianship; their place of first entry becomes the reception location until they turn 18. Most unaccompanied teenagers are placed in special protection centres, with children's homes accommodating the younger population who are placed according

to gender. A specialised reception centre run by an independent humanitarian institution accommodates boys aged 5 to 18. Nearly half of the children are placed with approved reception families; however, the number of eligible reception families is lower than the number of children requiring foster care. The types of foster care available are, long term, short term, emergency, temporary hosting, kinship, foster care for 1 – 3 children, a host family and a foster programme for a group of children aged 4 – 6. The states Social Work Services also monetarily support reception families with an allowance for childcare.

✚ In England, unaccompanied minors have the same rights and entitlements as their citizen peers, and their accommodation arrangements are regulated through domestic legislation and Carer Planning Regulations. All children in Local Authority care under the age of 16 will be placed in foster families, with the option to remain in that placement under “staying put” arrangements. Local Authorities who fail to place under 16’s in foster placements will be subject to investigation by Ofsted who regulate care services for Local Authorities. Young people who are 16+ will normally be placed in semi-independent living (SIL) arrangements, with separate bedrooms but shared communal spaces. A review into the provision of semi-independent living accommodation is currently underway in England, and new regulations are being approved that will regulate these provisions, with a view to strengthening the services offered and improve outcomes for all Looked After young people.

🇩🇪 Germany’s Child and Youth Welfare Act promotes full-time placement with a foster family, a residential institution or assisted living. Intensive individual socio-educational support can also be considered, depending on the individual needs and local housing opportunities. Young adults can also apply for individual assistance.

🇮🇹 Italy initially accommodate unaccompanied minors in government first reception facilities, specifically for minors in order to rescue, immediately protect, carry out identification and to gather information on the rights granted to the minors and how to exercise them. An interview is conducted by qualified staff in the reception facility together with a cultural mediator, a maximum 30 day stay in the reception centres is permitted by the Ministry of the Interior. Following the interview, they are placed in the reception and integration system and given a foster placement if no birth family are present.

### Educational arrangements for unaccompanied minors in the five member states

🇦🇹 Austria has no state-organised education for unaccompanied minors, persons actively involved in the asylum process are explicitly exempt from the Compulsory Education Act. In most cases the supervisors identify possible education providers within their federal states and they can go to high school if they meet the admission requirements. German courses, basic education and compulsory education (a curriculum that native Austrian’s receive) are individually attended but the type of schooling offered differs between the federal states.

🇨🇵 In Cyprus, unaccompanied children are required to be registered in a school, however, they can only be registered at specific institutions, including technical schools. They are taught very few subjects e.g. Greek and maths, and only the two districts of Nicosia and Limassol provide integrated schooling. Teachers are not trained to teach non-Greek speakers and foster care professionals have revealed some children do little during the lessons. The natural range of academic abilities are also not being provided for and there is repetition of the same class syllabus, without a structured educational progression, which results in the minor's dropping out of school. There is no evaluation of their individual language levels and no certificate for those that complete the syllabus; this lack of proof, means that they cannot continue their education. However, there are efforts to combat this situation and a certificate of high school completion is being proposed to enable the completion of high school, and then progression into further education. Hope For Children pays educators to deliver Greek and English lessons at the shelter to complement the morning schools; these lessons are an educational lifeline for those children arriving after the September school registration period. Football, music classes, dance movement therapy workshops and other subjects/classes using sponsorship are offered, all run by external instructors and appropriate volunteers both within and outside the shelter.






✚ Unaccompanied minors in England are required to access education in line with their citizen peers, with education being compulsory up until the age of 18 (16-18 can involve work, education or training). In reality, young people who arrive before they turn 16 (or qualify to be in the final year of high school) will be required to attend statutory school. Full integration into high school lessons is taken on a case-by-case basis and is dependent on literary skills, English language skills and levels of trauma *etc.* However, the expectation is that they will be in full time education. For young people who are 16-17, there is less provision available, with only limited access to English lessons at college for 7-10 hours per week. Young people can enrol on other courses and are not restricted at the state level but this is dependent on their individual ability.

🇩🇪 Like England, unaccompanied minors in Germany generally have the same access to education as any other child and therefore have a duty to attend school. In practice, there are more obstacles regarding access to education, with the federal states administering sixteen different school laws, with different concepts on dealing with unaccompanied minors and school attendance. This is further complicated by authorities that sit below the state level, who have a great deal of influence on the organization of schooling.


🇮🇹 Similar to Germany and England, foreign minors located in Italy are subject to compulsory schooling, with a right to education and access to educational services and participation in the school community. The 2017 "*Guidelines for the right to study of minors outside their family of origin*" allow a right to study. It states, "*In order to guarantee the right to study for this type of pupil, it is necessary to allow enrolment and inclusion in school at*

*any time of the year, even after the deadline and by submitting the application directly to the chosen school, without having to use the online enrolment platform".*

### What age does support cease for unaccompanied minors within the 5 member states?

-  Austria ceases support on the child's 18th birthday, with the date of birth being determined following an age assessment undertaken on every unaccompanied minor during their admission procedure.
-  Cyprus also ceases support at the age of 18 when the individual becomes an adult. In some cases, there is some continued monitoring.
-  In England, all Looked After Children are given "relevant" status up until their 18<sup>th</sup> birthday (providing they have been cared for, for a minimum of 13 weeks prior to their 18<sup>th</sup> birthday) and automatically are given "former relevant" status from the ages of 18. These rules also apply to unaccompanied minors. Under the Social Work Act 2017, all former relevant young people are entitled to ongoing support from the Local Authority up until they are 25 years old. This law did not fully consider the needs of former relevant unaccompanied minors and there can be some ambiguity around the statutory obligation to provide accommodation *etc.*, however, in practice, Local Authorities will provide support up until the age of 25 unless the young person becomes Appeal Rights Exhausted on their asylum claims, at which point support is withdrawn. Unaccompanied minors are awarded the "benefit of doubt" with regards to claimed ages unless there is evidence to suggest otherwise, at which point an age assessment is undertaken.
-  Youth and welfare support in Germany ceases at the age of 18. However, adolescents do have legal entitlement to the services of child and youth welfare beyond the age of 18, and up to 21. If necessary, youth and welfare services remain available until they reach 27. Like Austria, an age assessment determines the age of an unaccompanied minor, which in turn decides access to accommodation, support, education, legal representation and health care. The benefit of doubt regarding age is given to the child.
-  Italy ceases support at the maximum age of 18 but with "administrative continuation", which enables those who need prolonged support successfully achieve a positive social inclusion outcome. This support can be extended up to the age of 21.

### What happens to the unaccompanied minors that no longer receive support from regional or national governments in the 5 member states?

-  If a decision on an 18-year old minor in Austria has not yet been determined, they are transferred to a basic care centre for adults and given a daily allowance of 17€. If a positive asylum decision has been granted, they become independent and source accommodation and work for themselves; they can also apply for a minimum income from the state.

- 🇨🇵 In Cyprus, they have to apply for asylum and leave the shelters, moving into independent residences; they continue to get support for 6 months and receive visits from officers. Before leaving the shelter at 17.5, they enter a “rehabilitation program” to prepare them for outside life where they are assisted with CV writing, finding a job, house and completing coupon applications. They can also be relocated with their family in Europe. If the relocation case is open after a minor turns 18, they will need to move into an independent residence and can continue receiving support throughout this process. They can also receive training and can access support from agencies.
- ✚ Support is only terminated in England, if the young person has exhausted all applications to remain in the UK, and they are over the age of 18 years.
- 🇩🇪 If individuals in Germany don’t succeed or apply for an extension to the support period, the guardianship and provisions that previously protected them against deportation are terminated. In some cases, the individuals are moved into a community, refugee or homeless shelter.
- 🇮🇹 When an unaccompanied minor turns 18 and the administrative continuation to 21 is not arranged in Italy, there are two possible outcomes. If the foreign minor was placed in a reception centre when under 18, they have 6 months to remain. They can only be placed in an adult reception centre if they are awaiting an asylum decision, have subsidiary protection status or hold a residence permit for special cases (social protection, domestic violence or serious labour exploitation), need medical treatment, for disasters or acts of particular civil value. If they were placed in another reception centre when they turned 18, they have to leave and can be placed in the adult reception centre only if they have refugee or subsidiary protection or hold a residence permit for special cases. If they are awaiting an application decision, they can be placed in an adult centre for extraordinary reception. If they do not fall into one of these categories, they cannot be placed in either reception centre and are either repatriated or become illegal immigrants and are made destitute.

### What happens to unaccompanied minors who aren’t given the legal right to remain in the 5 member states when they reach adulthood?






- 🇦🇹 Following a negative asylum decision in Austria, the individual must leave the country or is deported. Return counselling centres in Fieberbrunn and Schwechat undertake quasi permanent counselling, however, to avoid deportation, many people leave this support and go illegally underground.
- 🇨🇵 Children who turn 18 in Cyprus and have a negative decision on their asylum application, get referred to organisations that cater to the adult refugee population. They can only appeal a negative decision once.

- ✚ In England, young people who are refused Asylum and that are not awarded other Leave to Remain in the UK, will be expected to make arrangements to leave the UK or become subject to the Hostile Environment policy. In reality, voluntary return of former unaccompanied minors is not taken up regularly, and young people will go missing and remain in the UK with no legal permission to do so. They become subject to the Hostile Environment with no right to work or access support (unless it is considered life-saving) and are at risk of detention and forced deportation.
- 🇩🇪 In Germany, those who have not attained a residence permit will be denied access to education and work and are obliged to return to their country of origin, either voluntarily or by force. They can be detained until deportation or may illegally disappear.
- 🇮🇹 A residence permit for minors can be applied for in Italy, that will be converted into a permit to study, work or await employment if their application has been denied. If they are 18 years old, they can also ask the Ministry of Labour and Social Policies for permission to apply for a permit to study, work or await employment.

How are voluntary agencies, involved in the care of unaccompanied minors, coordinated in the 5 member states?

- 🇦🇹 In Austria, sponsorship projects are available for young people to attend in several federal states. These sponsors receive training and are supervised, however, there is no official structure or coordination office for these NGO's.
- 🇨🇾 Cyprus has the NGO Hope For Children, who recruit some international volunteers via the Erasmus Solidarity Corps project and also university students from the Department of Psychology, however, trained support officers are responsible for the care of unaccompanied minors.
- ✚ There is no central coordination of volunteers in England and these are managed by the individual organisations. There are a wide variety of organisations working with this cohort of young people, ranging from smaller "grass roots" organisations to larger national organisations.
- 🇩🇪 Volunteers are coordinated by the individual welfare organisations in Germany, as there is no centralised coordination system between the voluntary agencies. The public welfare and youth services are responsible for the coordination of legal guardianship. Independent refugee councils located in most federal states, provide training programmes and legal advice services for volunteers.
- 🇮🇹 In Italy, there is no direct involvement of voluntary agencies in the care of unaccompanied minors but local authorities must train foster carers and tutor volunteers to look after and teach the unaccompanied minors.

## Support delivered by the voluntary sector in the 5 member states

-  In Austria, a lot of the work is undertaken on a voluntary basis. Interest has dwindled since 2015 and there are not enough volunteers to fill the need. The volunteers working with unaccompanied minors need support and this is currently undertaken by the NGO's and financed by the state.
-  In Cyprus, Homes for Hope Interdisciplinary and Holistic Services provide legal support and counselling, psychological evaluation and therapy, social support and integration and also educational support.
-  Voluntary support in England, is often engaged to enhance the support provided by the state. Where the state is responsible for the provision of accommodation and social welfare services, voluntary organisations often provide the holistic support to meet the needs of unaccompanied minors. Examples include befriending, youth group activities, educational enhancement *etc.*
-  There are several forms of voluntary engagement for unaccompanied minors in Germany, guardianship being most common. Since each unaccompanied minor requires a legal guardian, volunteers are called by social care teams to fulfil this important role. Godparents provide individual school education or vocational training and support to minors without being legal guardians. Mentoring is popular with young students, creating partnerships with unaccompanied minors; peer mentoring from former refugees has also been offered. Foster families take over legal guardianship, acting voluntarily and receiving financial compensation. Host families receive unaccompanied minors for limited contacts, *i.e.*, at weekends for mutual family-like activities. Independent counselling services support unaccompanied minors with legal issues, asylum and age assessment procedures.
-  To assist unaccompanied foreign minors In Italy, NGO's and third sector agencies deliver support, help, training and tutorage utilising volunteers. Specific European projects are further directed at this vulnerable demographic.

## 6. Findings from Interviews on Voluntary Arrangements

The information below has been collated from the answers given in Part 2 of the questionnaire, the country reports on voluntary arrangements. The aim of Part 2 was to gather the views of the voluntary organisations, to better understand the challenges that they face, where their successes lie and to identify any additional training support required that a free online curriculum could provide.

## Types of organisations interviewed

Nine organisations were interviewed that vary in size and outreach, from smaller grass-roots groups like *Mensch sein*, *Di Sana Pianta Aps* and *Intakt*, mid-size charities like *Refugee Action*, *Refugee Support Network* and *Zebra* to larger organisations like *Malteser Hilfsdienst* and *Hope for Children*; all of which operate independently but also alongside the statutory agencies in the 5 member states. One organisation, *Nuovi Orizzonti Società Cooperativa Sociale*, receives and accommodates the young people when they initially arrive in the territory.

These organisations predominantly provide specialist support, advice, guidance, mentorship and a social community with the aim of delivering a positive outcome for the unaccompanied minors that they advocate for.

## Services offered by the organisations

All of the organisations indicate that the time it takes to gain an asylum decision is too long, which causes a harmful impact on the mental health of the unaccompanied minors, arresting the opportunity to lead a fulfilled, happy and more productive life. These organisations have been commonly established to fulfil a role that was absent or inadequate within the system, with many advocating for unaccompanied minors in an attempt to speed up the immigration process.

Whilst waiting for the asylum decision, a range of services are provided to the unaccompanied minors, positively supporting these youths who commonly feel left in limbo. These include interpersonal skill support, one to one counselling, language and educational support, school transition skills and access to training/work. Organised networking and social events also provide a positive place for peer and volunteer interaction, promoting informal communications to be shared and a sense of place and calm where the unaccompanied minors can thrive. Games and group activities are common in these safe environments, which are unanimously reported to provide extremely positive effects on the mental health and wellbeing of all those that attend.

As well as offering space for social interaction and the learning of life skills, legal and administrative advice is commonly administered. This includes guidance and assistance in completing applications and gaining access to statutory monetary resources. These organisations also offer emotional support and mediation between the youth and the statutory agencies, advocating for the child whilst trying to expedite the asylum application to ensure that the youths are not lost in the system.

## Volunteers

To help with the number of asylum seekers that cross their thresholds and meet the high demands placed on the organisation's resources, teams of volunteer staff are commonly deployed where appropriate. Many of the organisations advertise for volunteers to come



forward, some have a wealth of offers for help, whilst others struggle to find enough individuals to meet the demand.

The organisations report that they initially interview the potential volunteers to ensure that they are suitable for the role. Following this, they are invited to open sessions where they can learn about the roles and responsibilities expected of them. This is often, but not always, followed by training, mentoring and supervision of the volunteers by paid staff members. Many of the volunteers have direct access to their supervisor in case of emergencies or to supply advice when required. Weekly check-ins are common, with supervision meetings to offer feedback and to track the progress of the volunteer in their role.

### Common key themes

There were many common key themes outlined by the organisations in the questionnaire answers, they were wide ranging and covered a variety of subjects, which are reviewed below.

#### Drop in volunteer numbers

The questionnaires reveal that the number of volunteers has been declining over the last few years, a fact which has further been exacerbated by the effects of the coronavirus outbreak, especially with the introduction of social distancing measures and the protection of vulnerable groups.

General apathy amongst the native populations has also been recognised as a major factor in the dwindling numbers of volunteers coming forward, which is in sharp contrast to the high degree of enthusiastic offers initially received when the so called “migrant crisis” was at its height.

The rise of right wing governments and negative rhetoric towards unaccompanied migrants and refugees across Europe has further been highlighted as a contributing factor to the drop in number of volunteers in the 5 member states.

The issue of retaining the volunteers was mentioned in the questionnaires, with a decrease in numbers following initial interest being common. Keeping the volunteers motivated, involved, progressing and flourishing in their roles requires a lot of time and effort, which the organisations have described as being a common issue. An increase in funding and personnel power is required to combat this shortfall.

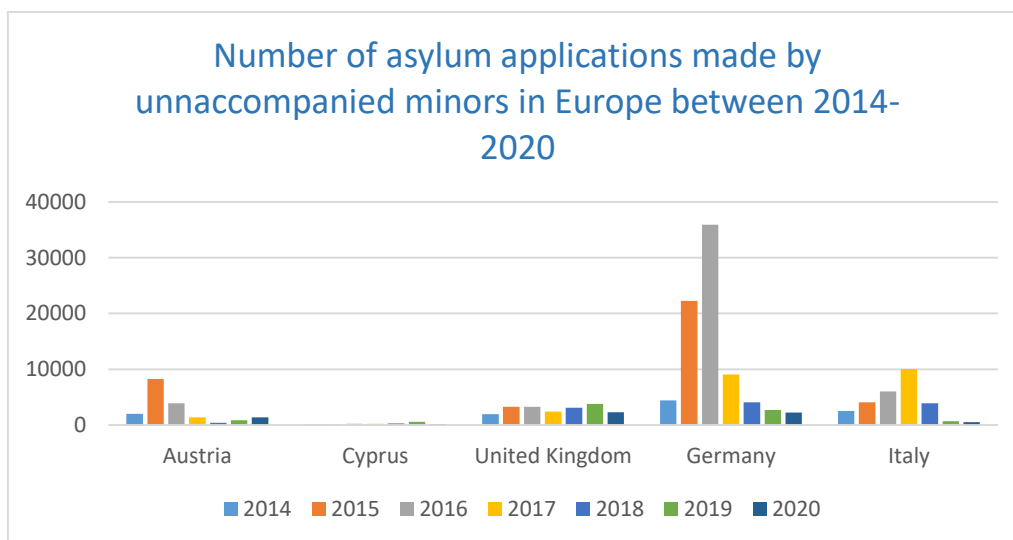
It is reported that volunteers who leave prematurely, sometimes feel that the organisation did not have the time to fully support their role or felt that they were not particularly respected or valued within the organisation. Some individuals also felt that they were ignored or left to fend for themselves and a lack of communication and supervision made them feel isolated as a volunteer.

It has also been highlighted that some of the instructors who run the classes get disheartened when the initial large group of unaccompanied minors that attend their classes, dwindle over time. It is countered that this participant drop-off, that naturally occurs for a range of reasons,

should not be taken as a failure in the quality of their classes, rather, having a few consistent attendees is actually a positive win and their classes provide a massively valuable resource to those heavily engaged unaccompanied minors that enthusiastically attend.

### Drop in number of unaccompanied minor arrivals

All member states have recorded a drop in the number of unaccompanied minors arriving in their countries since 2015, with the significant and most recent contributing factor being the Covid-19 Pandemic and the impact that closing borders has had on separated migrant children making the journey to Europe. Although some countries, such as Austria, saw a slight increase in their arrival rate during 2020, all member states have observed a reduction in numbers, with less applications being made than the figures of 2014.



*Data taken from Eurostat and the UKVI Home Office (Accessed April 2021)*

### Information technology

Information technology has become a particular focus, especially during the coronavirus outbreak. With lockdowns enforced across the 5 member states, a way of educating, communicating and accessing online information has become ever more important for the organisations, unaccompanied minors and volunteers alike. This equipment comes with a cost implication and specialist knowledge is further required to setup and provide tutoring in the use of the technology acquired. The distribution of IT to unaccompanied minors, also opens up safeguarding issues that will need to be addressed via specialist training in this field. All of which adds to the already stretched resources of the organisations in the 5 member states.

## Funding

A recurring theme that ran through all questionnaire answers, is the lack of funding received. If more funds were available, the services and support provided to unaccompanied minors could be significantly increased and improved, compared with the current situation. This is where VOLUME could add real value, with a free open resource readily available to the organisations, some of the cost implications of training, education and learning requirements could be offset, releasing funds to be utilised for other purposes.

## Successes and challenges that volunteers face on a daily basis

### Successes

The successes cited by the organisations include **gaining positive outcomes for the asylum seekers** who are under their charge, for example finding them a happy foster home, successful independent living placement, job or studentship to an education or training centre.

Another key success is the **enrichment of mental health** and the **emotional wellbeing** witnessed in the children, following social community events, mentoring, guidance and advice provided by the staff and volunteers. Their **growth in confidence, language skills** and **interactions** are cited as big wins, particularly when compared with their initial presentation.

The **development of long-term friendships, relationships** and a **place within the community**, are further successes detailed in the questionnaire answers.

### Challenges

The challenges faced by the organisations are fairly wide ranging, with **asylum system waiting times**, a **lack of funding** and the **Covid-19 outbreak** appearing as consistent issues faced in the 5 member states.

There appears to have been an increase in the **waiting times for asylum decisions** across the 5 member states over the last few years, which causes **distress and mental health issues** within the unaccompanied minors population.

The **slow speed of the asylum process** can **significantly impact on young people's ability to engage meaningfully** with their support. A **lack of stability**, and a feeling of **being in limbo**, can interact negatively with the work of the organisations, which volunteers on the ground regularly cite as one of their frustrations with the system.

Although the **slow speed of the asylum process** remains outside of the organisations control, staff spoke about how they can take positive steps in navigating this system. **Positive relationship**

**based practice** was commonly referred to when discussing the work of the volunteers, and how it can **promote resilience** and **positive emotional wellbeing in young people** who are **subject to delays** and **immigration instability**.

**Reliable funding** has been difficult to come by in the 5 member states, especially for the smaller “grass roots organisations”, causing **challenges in financial planning**. This has a negative knock-on effect on the **decision making process**, with judgments made on an *ad hoc* basis, rather than steadily managed if the funds were consistently available.

Being unable to **support unaccompanied minors** with the **psychological trauma** that they carry with them, was also a frequently occurring concern. **Lack of specialist services** and **availability of suitably trained professionals** and **interpreters** meant that these needs were often unmet, which can also impact on the work organisations undertake.

A **physical barrier**, was the **wearing of masks** when communicating with individuals caused by the **COVID-19 outbreak**. Organisations have also reported being unable to host a number of individuals in their premises due to the pandemic.

A further challenge identified is the **occasional breakdown in relationship** and/or **communication between** the **organisation** and the **statutory authorities**. This has implications for the young people who may rely on the external organisations for advocacy support. Organisations and volunteers with a **good working knowledge** of the **statutory system** felt **confident to advocate** on behalf of young people when required, however, others struggled to achieve this due to a **lack of knowledge** around **domestic law and policy** with regard to the young people they are supporting.

## 7. General Requirements of the free online open access training resource

Most of the organisations have highlighted that their resources are stretched. Training and education requires suitable individuals and programs, which commonly comes with a financial implication. The volunteers for unaccompanied minors get educated program can help to fill some of the gap in resources that the organisations keenly feel. The questionnaire data has revealed that additional volunteer training in a variety of disciplines is needed, in areas like language support, a general education curriculum, volunteer and unaccompanied minors mental and physical health training, motivational mentoring training, access to emotional support, anti-racism training *etc.*

The proposed free online open access training resource has been positively received within the 5 member states. Answers indicate that the resource would have to be easily available and accessible to both the organisations and volunteers and set out and ordered in a way that best

assists them in their respective roles. This can be achieved by having an interface that clearly signposts individual modules within the resource structure and using simple navigational icons in order to cater for a wide range of computer literacy.

## 8. Proposed modules of the free online open access training resource

The proposed modules described below, have been based on the answers written in the questionnaires. This list is by no means exhaustive, and modules can be added or updated as required.

### Age assessment process

Organisations wanted to better understand the process, roles and responsibilities of parties involved, and to feel confident in upholding the rights and entitlements of young people who were subject to these assessments. The EU Reception Directive<sup>7</sup> does not define a common minimum standard for age assessment. However, their agency, the European Asylum Support Office (EASO) do have guidelines. The EASO publication *“aims to encourage exchange of information and expertise to perform age assessments, providing an overview meant to serve as a resource for Member States”*<sup>8</sup>. Despite these guidelines being available, it is evident that each member state takes a different approach to age determination, which will prove to be challenging when developing a module that is able to encompass all of the different approaches. The EASO guidelines could act as a foundation when writing this module, developing training focussed on outlining the basic principles of how an age assessment should be undertaken, utilising current research topics e.g. age assessment reliability etc.

### Anti-racism training

Prompted by the Black Lives Matter movement, organisations have been exploring how their policies and direct work are in line with anti-racist practice. Some have suggested that a module prompting volunteers and staff to examine their internal biases and develop a deeper understanding of how racist practice is endemic in all lines of work, will not only improve outcomes for young people, but it will also get people to question the “status quo” of both current and future work ensuring that black voices and other marginalised groups are amplified.

### Radicalisation training

The increased use of IT, to give/receive services during the Covid-19 pandemic, has led to concerns about internet safety, and the vulnerability of young people to exploitation, including radicalisation. Organisations have expressed an interest in learning how to safeguard and protect young people from exploitation online. At its heart, radicalisation is simply grooming and

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<sup>7</sup> Directive 2013/33/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council

<sup>8</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/anti-trafficking/publications/easo-age-assessment-practices-europe\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/anti-trafficking/publications/easo-age-assessment-practices-europe_en)

exploitation, but in this instance, it is for the purpose of violence. Grooming young people for the purposes of radicalisation, sexual exploitation, trafficking, criminal activity *etc.* follows the same process and it may be useful to consider whether a module outlining how the grooming process works, what signs to look out for, and how to have “keep safe” conversations might be a useful addition to volunteer training.

### Crisis intervention and de-escalation

Organisations also expressed an interest in developing skills to support young people to regulate their emotions, using methods to prevent an escalation of behaviour. It might be beneficial for volunteers to develop their understanding of the principles of mental health “first aid” to support young people in an emotional crisis, whilst waiting for professional help/treatment to commence. In addition to this, giving staff the confidence to de-escalate behaviours in a 1:1 and group setting was another request.

### Cultural mediation, customs, traditions and sensitivity training

Some organisations expressed an interest in subject specific modules looking at cultural competency, however, given the wide range of young people organisations it might be beneficial to move on from cultural competence to cultural humility. *“To practice cultural humility is to maintain a willingness to suspend what you know, or what you think you know, about a person based on generalizations about their culture. Rather, what you learn about your clients’ culture stems from being open to what they themselves have determined is their personal expression of their heritage and culture.”*<sup>9</sup>

### Emotional support training for both volunteers and unaccompanied minors

Similar to the Crisis Intervention and De-Escalation modules mentioned above, information to develop volunteers understanding and skills to support young people to regulate their emotions. In addition to this, modules could provide an increased awareness of trauma indicators, both for young people and volunteers themselves. Consideration could also be given to the inclusion of vicarious trauma in professionals working in this field.

### Member state first language training

All member states reported a need for increased language skills amongst the unaccompanied minor population. Although this sits outside the remit of the project, volunteers could be given ideas and tools to promote new language acquisition, supporting the language training they already receive. This could incorporate theoretical knowledge of language acquisition in addition to practical steps to promote this on a daily basis.

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<sup>9</sup> Moncho, C. (2013, August 19). Cultural humility, part I — What is ‘cultural humility’? *The Social Work Practitioner*.

### Food science and preparation, wellness and nutrition

A number of suggestions were put forward to enable volunteers to promote self-care skills in the unaccompanied minor population, fulfilling some of the roles that parents and carers would have had in their children's lives were they able to be present. Recognising that young people will have developed independent survival skills in order to enter Europe unaccompanied, and taking these young people from this basic survival to fully functioning independent living.

### Healthy living and physical activity

See *food science and preparation, wellness and nutrition* as this could be implemented in the same module.

### IT and internet training, software and hardware

The global pandemic has meant that direct support has had to move online and this has highlighted the need for IT training. Training would focus on upskilling volunteers and organisations to use IT facilities competently and safely and could also incorporate the keep safe online work mentioned previously.

### Mental health

As above, mental health was a recurring theme in the interviews. Participants voiced concerns about how these needs often went unmet or there were obstacles in the way of accessing the appropriate resources due to a lack of trained professionals, appropriate interpreters *etc.* In line with the proposals above, a module on mental health could introduce volunteers to these barriers, building on their empathetic approach to work, whilst providing advice and guidance on how to talk to young people about mental health in a way that is accessible, and taking into consideration the stigma around mental health that is prevalent in some cultures and communities.

### Migration routes, country specific

Some organisations wished to better understand the journeys young people take to arrive in Europe. By updating their knowledge, they hope to provide a more "trauma-informed" approach to their work. This module could also tie into cultural humility and anti-racist practice, challenging some of the narrative around why young people undertake their journeys.

### Mentoring

A number of organisations cited the achievements of former unaccompanied minors to become mentors as experts by experience. A module on becoming a mentor, that outlines the roles and responsibilities, expected behaviour and opportunities for development will enable former young people to undertake an informal certification. This will not only promote their own personal development but will greatly benefit the end recipients.

## Navigating government systems

Organisations expressed a need to better understand the government systems and how they can support young people to navigate this process. When explored in more detail, organisations felt that young people did not always receive the services they were entitled to, and organisations wished to develop their understanding of the nuances around statutory services, so they can better advocate for young people they are supporting. This may be more difficult to implement due to the wide range of differing legislation and policy prevalent across the 5 member states.

## Personal finance and budgeting

In line with the above proposed modules, this unit falls into self-care skills. Here, it might be appropriate to highlight the potential gaps in self-care skills and something to bear in mind when working with unaccompanied minors.

## Roles, responsibilities, expectations and boundaries of the volunteer

Volunteering opportunities cover a large range of services with differing timescales. It is therefore important to consider the impact of this on the young people. Some organisations recruit graduates or students on placement, which will always be time limited, whereas other organisations require a minimum of a 12-month commitment. It is important for volunteers to understand the impact that they can have on young people and therefore it might be useful to provide a module on their roles, responsibilities, and boundaries.

## Sexual health

In line with the self-care modules previously discussed, organisations identified a gap in training that would enable them to discuss issues, for example sexual health or female genital mutilation in an appropriate way.

## Substance abuse

Some organisations expressed an interest in learning how to spot the warning signs of substance abuse and how they can work with young people to prevent this becoming an issue. As above, it might be appropriate to link this with other modules promoting discussions and education around self-care skills.

## 9. Limitations of the questionnaire data recovered

Due to the Covid-19 pandemic there has been a significant reduction in the number of separated migrant children across Europe and this has resulted in a decrease in volunteer populations and services. Some organisations were able to pivot their services online, however, others who had previously provided more social integration support, saw a drop in engagement. This reduced the number of organisations we could approach for the purposes of this report.



Through these discussions, it became evident that although numbers were not as high as previous years, organisations wanted to feel secure in the knowledge that should the numbers increase again, they had the resources ready and available to meet the demand for services and to complete training for the volunteers. In addition to the organisations, it might have also been beneficial to interview a small number of volunteers to better understand their training experiences, highlighting the things that went well but also identifying those that could have worked better. This was not part of the proposal, but it may have provided complimentary information or opposing insight regarding volunteer training practices.

## 10. Conclusion

Despite the sample size being small (10 organisations from 5 member states), the information collected reveals that there is a wide range of services that volunteer organisations deliver to separated migrant children in Europe. The interviews provide an overview of both the successes and challenges encountered by the volunteers and organisations, from the smaller “grass roots” providers through to larger national agencies.

There was a wide range of training programme provision outlined by the various organisations, with some providing more informal training and others mandating a set course of modules. However, despite this difference, there were some common key themes identified across all 5 member states.

This report highlights some of the current training models adopted within the 5 member states and identifies gaps that could be filled by a free online resource to benefit those organisations providing volunteer services to separated migrant children in Europe. The proposed modules are not an exhaustive list but rather key training themes identified in the interviews. Consideration has been given to ensure that the modules proposed do not duplicate existing programmes but rather add value to and compliment those training resources currently provided.



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