

# Age assessments full briefing, January 2026

## What are age assessments?

Each year, several thousand unaccompanied children enter the UK seeking safety. In 2024, for example, there were **4,104 claims** from unaccompanied asylum-seeking children. Many of them have lost documentation while fleeing war, persecution, or violence, or were forced to travel using false papers. Rather than being met first and foremost as children in need of protection, they are frequently treated with suspicion, subjected to invasive questioning, and assessed on little more than their appearance and behaviour.

While both adults and children seeking asylum are entitled to support, children under 18 are entitled to specific protections under sections Section 17 and 20 of the **Children Act 1989**. Local authorities have a statutory duty to safeguard and promote the welfare of children within their jurisdiction, including providing accommodation and care.

Age assessments are used to determine whether an individual is under or over 18. This decision has life-altering consequences because it determines whether a young person is treated as a child and placed in care, or instead, placed into the adult asylum system, including adult accommodation or detention-like settings.

## The process

There are two possible stages of age assessment when someone enters the UK and claims asylum.

### Age assessments: port of entry

The first usually occurs at a port of entry, where the Home Office makes an initial assessment. While this step is supposed to be based on the official age assessment **guidance**, referred to as the Merton compliant process, in **practice**, young people are regularly assessed on little more than appearance or demeanour.

If a young person does not have documentation – or if a border official questions their stated age – this can lead to a case of disputed age. Border officials have three choices: to accept a person's age, to dispute their age, or to decide that the individual under assessment is significantly over the age of 18.

Where a child falls within the first two categories, a referral will be made to local authorities, often for a more detailed or “holistic” assessment. Meanwhile, if they are deemed an adult, they will be sent to adult accommodation and treated as an adult throughout the asylum process.

## Second assessment

A second assessment may be conducted by local authorities if a child or individual is referred to children's services by the Home Office, a legal representative, or an organisation providing assistance.

Local authorities can either choose to accept a young person's stated age or conduct their own assessment. However, they have a duty to carry out an age assessment for any referral received, regardless of the Home Office's initial decision. If the young person is found to be under 18, they must be put into the care of the local authority and their asylum claim treated accordingly.

This process was altered following the implementation of the Nationality and Borders Act 2022 under which the Government introduced the National Age Assessment Board (NAAB), which operates **Home Office**.

Under this system, local authorities can refer cases to NAAB to conduct further assessment. However, NAAB has been under intense scrutiny, and in 2023, the British Association of Social Workers (BASW) **emphasised** the risks of the Home Office operationalising NAAB, due to threats of political influence in a process that should be completely independent.

## Systemic issues with age assessments

Age assessments can have serious consequences for young people. Every year, children are wrongfully identified as adults and denied the care and protections they are entitled to by law. After taking long, exhausting journeys, many young people are immediately subjected to age assessment interviews, often without interpretation services or any understanding of the process. This can result in them being misidentified as adults and placed in inappropriate accommodation – resulting in serious safeguarding concerns.

The scale of error demonstrates a system-wide problem. Home Office **data** from 2022 reveals that for the 5,010 asylum claims made by unaccompanied asylum-seeking children, there were 2,999 associated age disputes, accounting for almost 60% of all children who entered the country.

In 2025, the Independent Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration released a new **inspection**, which highlights that the Immigration Officers (IOs) and Chief Immigration Officers (CIOs), who deliver the initial age decisions at the border, are not experts at age assessments. In fact, determining age is just one of their many duties, and the training only became available relatively **recently**. The Chief Inspector noted that one of the primary concerns among key stakeholders is the continued lack of training around "culture-specific differences on aging and the effects of trauma on aging" and asking "questions in a trauma-informed" manner. Moreover, when inspectors visited sites in November 2024, many of the staff on duty still had not undergone any specialist age assessment training.

## Serious errors with age assessments

Given these findings, it is unsurprising that there is an array of data highlighting major issues with age assessments.

This includes:

- A 2022 Helen Bamber Foundation report which **documents** over 800 cases where children were wrongly classified as adults, and placed in adult contingency accommodation or detention centres.
- Evidence from **the Refugee Council** in 2022 that 94% of the young people they support had initially been deemed adults by the Home Office – only to later be correctly identified as children by local authorities.
- A further Refugee Council **study**, published in early 2024, also found that during the 18-month period between January 2022 and June 2023, more than 1300 children were wrongly assessed as adults.
- More recently, the Greater Manchester Immigration Aid Unit, released a **report** in July 2025 showing that between January 2024 and February 2025, at least 296 children were wrongly classified as adults and sent in adult asylum accommodation across North West England.

## The consequences of disputes

Disputes over age can take months or even years to resolve, during which children may be exposed to harm in adult settings or be unable to access crucial resources like specialist services or educational provisions.

This experience can have a devastating impact on a child's mental health, especially for those who have already endured traumatic life events in their country of origin or along their journey to safety. Being disbelieved by state authorities, compounded by the isolation of the asylum system, can lead to feelings of hopelessness and loss of safety or security.

These issues would be preventable if proper safeguards were imposed so that all children claiming asylum in the UK are protected through proper channels that treat them with dignity and care. The purpose of age assessments should be to meet the care needs of children, not to strip them of key protection services, and put them into the adult asylum system.

## Racism embedded in age assessment process

For decades, age assessments have been used as a tool for immigration control, exerting a racialised framework. All too often, young people are consequently automatically viewed through a lens of disbelief and scepticism.

The Nationality and Borders Act 2022 authorised the use of so-called ‘scientific methods’ for examining a young person’s body, through X-rays of teeth and bones, and MRIs of knees and collarbones.

These dehumanising practices echo colonial anthropological practices that sought to classify non-white bodies, falsely presenting racialised assumptions as objective science. As researchers Rachel Rosen and S. Kahn **highlight**, a “universal child developmental theory does not exist.”

Yet, these assessments continue to compare children who have experienced various forms of trauma, often directly to their bodies, to a false euro-centric standard.

Rosen and Kahn’s **research**, which analysed eight age assessment reports, along with evidence from HIAS+JCORE’s own caseworkers – who have also observed the age assessment reports of the young people we support through our JUMP project – indicate the use of hostile, and degrading language to describe the young people interviewed.

The reports often contain discourse focused on the demeanour and personality of the young people, insinuating that features like a “strong jawbone”, growth of facial hair, or “confident” mannerisms indicate unequivocal proof of a person’s age. Meanwhile, cultural considerations, trauma responses, and language barriers are largely disregarded.

## **AI and facial age estimation**

On July 22, 2025, Angela Eagle MP, former Minister of State for Border Security and Asylum, **announced** that the Government plans to implement Facial Age Estimation “*to produce an age estimate with a known degree of accuracy for an individual whose age is unknown or disputed.*”

While this development means that pseudo-scientific methods of assessing age such as x-ray scans of bones and teeth – which have been **described** as unethical and imprecise by professional medical bodies, who condemn exposing individuals to radiation for non-medical purposes – will be discontinued, HIAS+JCORE is concerned that the Home Office will be merely swapping one poor method of determination age for another.

**Evidence** shows that AI models are known to reproduce bias, racist attitudes, and profiling, which will only complicate a system that is already highly sensitive. Replacing human bias with algorithmic bias does not fix the problem, but will instead remove additional layers of transparency and accountability.

## Policy recommendations

We urge the Government to:

- Ensure age assessments are conducted only by properly trained, independent social workers.
- Abolish the use of pseudo-scientific and AI-based age assessment methods.
- Require transparent publication of data on all age disputes and outcomes.
- Ensure age assessments are child-led, trauma informed, and non-routine.
- Embed anti-racism and trauma-informed practices into all safeguarding decisions and trainings.

## Learn more

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