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Family Reunification Policies for Refugee Children and Young People in Ireland and the UK

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Introduction

Family reunification describes the state authorised migration channel by which families separated through migration are reunited in the destination country where the sponsoring family member resides. It is a key instrument for upholding the right to family life under international and EU law. For refugees, family reunification is 'one of the most pressing concerns' as they attempt to re-establish their life after forced displacement (UNHCR, 2018, p.1).

Over the past two decades, family reunification has become a significant legal entry channel to Europe for migrants, including refugees. In 2023, it accounted for 26% of all first residence permits issued in the European Union (EU), although rates vary between states (EMN, 2025). In Ireland (a member of the EU) and the UK (no longer a member of the EU), family visa figures have been significantly lower than the EU average constituting 5% and 9%, respectively, of all first permit visas issued in 2024 (Murphy et al., 2025; Migration Observatory, 2025). However, in both the UK and Ireland, family visas have nonetheless been a key focus of political attention within wider debates on immigration and asylum governance. In both states in 2025-26, family reunification for refugees specifically has been a core element of significant legislative and policy reforms that have set out new restrictions to this route of entry. In Ireland, the International Protection Act 2026, signed into law by President Catherine Connolly on 22 April 2026 and linked to the EU Migration and Asylum Pact which comes into effect on 12 July, introduces restrictions on the eligibility of refugees to apply for family reunification as part of a substantial overhaul of the asylum system (Irish Times, 2026). Meanwhile, in the UK, refugee family reunification applications were paused entirely in September 2025 also as part of wider changes planned for the asylum system; a new more restricted scheme is to be announced in Spring 2026 (Home Office, 2025a).

It is in this context that this paper considers family reunification policies for refugee children and their families in Europe, focussing on Ireland and the UK to illustrate some common approaches taken in Europe as well as where and how these diverge. In debates on the rights to family reunification and asylum governance more widely,

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refugee children and their welfare and safety are often evoked as moral touchstones both by those advocating for restrictions and those advocating against them (Sirriyeh, 2018). In Europe, this has been particularly apparent since the declared refugee crisis of 2015 when the drowning of the three-year-old Syrian child Alan Kurdi was reported in the media globally. Public and political debates continue to regularly reference the deaths of young children who have drowned during boat crossings to Europe and between mainland Europe and the UK (Taylor, 2026; UNICEF, 2025). Meanwhile, longstanding supranational conventions on the rights of children and rights to family life highlight the welfare of refugee children and, in doing so, make specific reference to family reunification (UDHR, 1948; CRC, 1989).

This paper explores how family reunification policies apply to a) parents with refugee status sponsoring their children to join them in Ireland or the UK from abroad (or from outside of the EU in the case of Ireland); and b) separated children with refugee status seeking to sponsor parents and siblings to join them in Ireland or the UK from abroad (UK) or from outside the EU (Ireland). The paper provides an overview of family reunification legislation and policies and highlights some of the main themes in current policy interventions and debates.

Refugee Children

Globally, 40 % of forcibly displaced persons are children (UNHCR, 2025). Some children travel with their families. However, refugee families may become separated during conflict, displacement and protracted and fragmented migratory journeys, while sometimes new family formations are created (Wilmsen, 2011; Crawley et al, 2018). Increased border restrictions and consequently increasingly dangerous alternative migration routes mean that parents often travel first with the intention of applying for partners and children to join them through family reunification, one of the few safe legally authorised routes through which people can move and resettle.

Separated children are children and young people under the age of 18 who have been separated from both parents or their legal/customary care giver and are outside of their country of origin. While various definitions of separated children are used to refer to children in different situations, in this paper I use the term to discuss the experiences of separated children who are seeking asylum. Terminology varies across different states and even different institutions within the same state,. These children and young people are often referred to as unaccompanied minors. In this paper, children and young people are referred to as 'separated' rather than 'unaccompanied' to recognise that although they are separated from their parents they may travel or reside with

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other people, including other family members, and may continue to be in contact with parents during and after their migration.

More than half of all children who arrived in Europe to seek asylum in 2024 were separated children and many seek to reunite with family members (UNHCR, UNICEF and IOM, 2024). In 2025, 21,125 separated children applied for asylum for the first time in the EU; a decrease of 38.9% compared to 2024 (Eurostat, 2026). The highest number of applications were received in Germany, the Netherlands, Greece, and Belgium, respectively, while the top countries of citizenship for separated children seeking asylum were Afghanistan, Eritrea, Syria, Egypt and Somalia (Eurostat, 2026). In Ireland, 248 separated children applied for asylum while 4,999 children were dependent on adult asylum claims in that year (Irish Refugee Council, 2025). In the UK, 4,269 separated children applied for asylum in 2025, and 12,441 children were dependent on adult asylum claims made that year (Home Office, 2026).

Research scholarship with refugee children and young people in Europe has explored a range of themes relating to their arrival, settlement and care. Studies have examined access to, and experiences in, social care (De Backer et al., 2022; Ní Raghallaigh and Sirriyeh, 2015) and education (Koehler and Schneider, 2019), and separated children's challenging experiences of navigating asylum processes (Allsopp, 2025) and age assessments (Greaves, 2026). Meanwhile, there has been a particular focus on themes of wellbeing, mental health, belonging and integration (Behrendt et al., 2022; Ögtem-Young, 2024). However, to date, research on family reunification and children's experiences in this process has been more limited, although there is a small emerging literature on this topic (Bergset et al., 2025; Smith et al., 2025; Tørrisplass, 2025; Winkens et al., 2025).

Legal frameworks governing family reunification

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) states that, 'the family is the natural and fundamental group unit of society and is entitled to protection by society and the State.' Articles 7, 9 and 10 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) also declare that states should take a positive and humane approach to processing applications relating to child–parent reunification. In the EU, the legal framework for family reunification of third-country nationals emanates from Council Directive 2003/86/EC (Family Reunification Directive). This Directive sets out the rights that legally residing third-country nationals have in relation to family reunification. The Directive applies to people with refugee status but not to those who are still waiting for their asylum claim to be determined or for those with subsidiary protection (i.e. forms of protection that recognise it is not safe for people to return to their country of

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origin but these are not a grant of refugee status) (Radjenovic, 2020). Smith et al (2025) note that although Ireland has not adopted the Family Reunification Directive, the national legislative and policy framework was informed by its provisions. In Ireland, the statutory basis for family reunification is set out in the International Protection Act 2015 but this is being superseded by the International Protection Act 2026 which comes into effect on 12 July 2026. People granted refugee status and subsidiary protection, including separated children, can apply for family reunification in Ireland.

In 2016, the UK electorate voted to leave the EU. This was concluded with the European Union (Withdrawal Agreement) Act 2020. Since then, EU legislation, including on family reunification, no longer applies in the UK. Until September 2025, sponsors who had refugee status could apply under Appendix Family Reunion (Sponsors with Protection) for a pre-flight partner or dependent children to join them in the UK (Home Office, 2025b). There was no minimum income threshold for refugees or other integration requirements. Alternatively, if sponsors in the UK were a close relative of a child, such as a sibling, they could apply via the Appendix Child Relative (Sponsors with Protection) route which incurred an application fee and a commitment from the UK sponsor to financially support and accommodate the child without recourse to public funds (Home Office, 2025c).

Unlike most states in Europe, in the UK separated children are not entitled to sponsor family members to join them, which was the case even when the UK was in the EU. Since September 2025, refugee family reunification routes have been paused entirely by the UK government (Gower, 2025). A new more restricted scheme is expected to be announced in 2026. The government justified this decision by claiming that family reunification was acting as a pull factor drawing people to seek asylum in the UK and that the numbers of people arriving through family reunification were placing a strain on local council budgets (Gower, 2025). Currently, people with refugee status may be able to apply for a family visa instead, but this is subject to the same conditions as British citizens and other British residents meaning they must meet the minimum income threshold of £29,000 per year and an English language requirement (Jorgensen, 2025). These requirements make reunion unachievable for many given the many barriers refugees face in securing employment.

Whether in Ireland, the UK or other European states, applicants for family reunion are required to submit a range of documentation to evidence identity and family relationships including marriage certificates, birth certificates and travel documents. Where documents are not available, alternative evidence such as witness statements or DNA tests may be accepted. In the context of conflict, persecution and displacement such evidentiary requirements can be challenging and take time to gather. In both the

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UK and Ireland, legal advice is not available under Legal Aid provision despite the complex forms, application process and evidential requirements that applicants must navigate (Smith et al., 2025; ECRE, 2015).

Finally, this paper focuses on family reunification with family members who are in a third country. However, it should be noted that people with refugee status in Ireland and the UK may also seek to reunite with family members who have arrived in other EU states. The 2013 Dublin III Regulation determines which state is responsible for examining asylum claims when a person claims asylum in an EU Member State (Smyth, 2022)[i]. It establishes that 'respect for family life' and the child's 'best interests' must be the primary considerations in applying the regulation. If a separated child applies for asylum in an EU state, their application must be examined in the Member State where a parent, sibling or relative who can take care of the child is legally present as long as this is in the child's 'best interests'. Therefore, the state in which the child applies for asylum must take action to identify any of these family members residing in other EU states. In 2018 approximately 15% (159) of family reunions in the UK that took place through the Dublin Regulation allowed separated children in other EU states to be reunited with relatives in the UK without the burden of application fees and financial and welfare conditionalities that apply in the child relative family reunification routes discussed earlier (Safe Passage, 2025a). However, since the UK left the EU, there has been no replacement mechanism to facilitate separated children to be reunited with family in the UK (ibid).

Eligibility for family reunion

One of the most contested issues in family reunification policy is eligibility, both in terms of who can apply to sponsor family members to reunite and in terms of which family members can be sponsored to be reunited with them. The criteria for eligible family members vary between states (EMN, 2025). Research has centred on tensions between cultural and policy definitions and practices of 'family' and the question of whether and how eligibility should extend beyond the nuclear family (Phillimore et al., 2023). In most states, extended family members are not permitted to be sponsored except under specific health-related dependency or humanitarian grounds (EMN, 2025).

Researchers and campaigners have argued that family reunification policies reflect, and contribute to, the construction of the patriarchal heteronormative nuclear family as the 'natural' family and centre an exclusionary Eurocentric understanding of family (Turner, 2020). While all EU states permit applications for spouses and minor children under the age of 18, some states do not permit applications for non-married partners

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or same-sex partners, and many states do not permit adult applicants to apply for their parents to join them (EMN, 2025). In Ireland, cohabiting partners or long-term partners are not eligible for family reunification under the International Protection Act 2015 (Potter et al., 2024). The 2026 Act includes the possibility of reunification with a 'de facto' partner which appears to be less restrictive (House of Oireachtas, 2026).

Meanwhile, both Ireland and the UK require that family relationships pre-date the sponsor's application for international protection, a condition that is also applied in a small number of other countries such as Austria, France and Slovakia (ECRE, 2022). In the UK, only pre-flight relationships are eligible meaning that relationships formed during transit or established after the refugee sponsor arrived in the UK are excluded (Jorgensen, 2025). Currently, in the UK and Ireland, family members of refugees are not subject to language or integration requirements while sponsors also do not have to meet income thresholds. This is likely to change when new family reunification legislation and policies are introduced in both states in 2026.

Under the International Protection Act 2015 in Ireland, applications for family reunification must be made within one year of being granted international protection status, but the International Protection Act 2026 Act will introduce a two-year waiting period before sponsors can apply for family reunification. In addition to the two-year waiting period, the Act introduces a minimum income requirement threshold for sponsors to apply for family reunification and a requirement not to be in receipt of certain social welfare and housing benefits, further limiting who is eligible to apply. Such requirements have already been implemented in some other European states. For example, in Denmark, which the current UK government looks to as an example of good practice in immigration and asylum policy (Cuibus, 2025), family members of refugees are in theory subject to the same conditions as other migrants arriving through family reunification including minimum language skills, and integration requirements, while sponsors must meet a minimum income threshold (Jorgensen, 2025). However, there are exceptions in place for partners at risk of persecution or those caring for minor children, meaning that, in practice, many refugees are exempt from the restrictions (ibid).

In the UK and all EU states, children under the age of 18 can be beneficiaries of family reunification schemes, although in many states this is only applicable to young people who are unmarried (FRA, 2018). All EU states also permit separated unmarried children to apply as sponsors for family reunification once they have refugee status (ECRE, 2022). The UK does not. In Ireland, as in most EU states, when separated children are the applicants for family reunification, they can only apply for their parents and unmarried siblings under the age of 18 to join them (Smith et al., 2025). Ireland has a

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discretionary policy for separated children who turn 18 during this time allowing them to submit applications for family reunification (Potter et al., 2024). This is significant given the lengthy periods for asylum determination. In Ireland, social workers from the team for separated children seeking international protection assist with family tracing applications for family reunification, although their capacity to support families following reunification is limited and not within their current remit (Groarke and Arnold, 2018; Ní Raghallaigh et al., 2019).

As noted, the UK does not permit separated children to apply for family reunion and did not permit this even when the UK was a member of the EU since it opted out of the Family Reunion Directive (Coram CLC, 2019). There have been repeated campaigns from organisations working with refugees and separated children in the UK to change this policy. For example, in 2024 these organisations advocated for the passing of the Refugee Family Reunion Bill which failed to be passed into legislation (Safe Passage, 2025b). A common argument against allowing family reunification for separated children in the UK is the theory that this would encourage families to send their children to the UK on precarious journeys, with the risk that they would be trafficked or exploited (Coram CLC, 2019). However, although separated children in EU states have this right to reunion, there has been no evidence to show this has motivated families to send children first to secure residency (EMN, 2025).

While the Family Reunion Directive provides the overall framework that governs approaches to family reunion in the EU, EU states have developed increasingly varied approaches on eligibility for sponsorship, as many become increasingly restrictive. Across the EU, a range of measures have been proposed and enacted to differentiate and restrict family reunion eligibility, commonly using approaches such as adjustments to age thresholds, waiting periods, and proof of income requirements (EMN, 2025; FRA, 2026).

In 2025, Austria, like the UK, paused the family reunification scheme for refugees, with both states citing a crisis in the rising number of applications and claimed social and economic pressures (Jorgensen, 2025). In the UK currently if people submitted their application for asylum *before* 2 March 2026 and are successful, they are granted five years leave to remain before they can apply for permanent residence (Gov.UK, 2026). However, some aspects of the government's proposals for a new asylum and immigration system (under consultation) have already been introduced. This means that if people applied for asylum *after* 2 March 2026 and are granted asylum they are now given only 30 months leave to remain (not five years) before they must apply to renew their leave (ibid). If the government's proposed new asylum rules come in to effect, when people are granted asylum they will be placed on a new 'core protection'

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route. While on this route they will not be eligible to apply for family reunification unless they were able to transfer on to a work or study visa route, or they became eligible to apply for citizenship (Cuibus, 2025). If they remain on the core protection route, they will not be able to apply for citizenship until they have resided in the UK for 20 years (ibid). While other states in Europe have introduced new restrictions, the family reunification route remains open to applications for people with refugee status and in some cases to those with other forms of international protection (except in Austria).

Support after reunification

The OECD's International Migration Outlook (2019) found that when there is a delay in family reunification, this can have detrimental impact on mental and physical health, the educational achievement of children, labour market outcomes, and the household's long-term risk of poverty and language acquisition, thereby undermining integration. Given lengthy delays in family reunification processes, support is needed after reunification to help families navigate some of these challenges (Phillimore et al., 2023). For sponsors who are separated minors, they are likely to have turned 18 by the time their families are permitted to join them, they will have left the care system and may be receiving only limited after care support if any (Ní Raghallaigh et al., 2025). Young people and their families may be navigating changed family dynamics and relationships after long periods of separation where family members have had to assume new responsibilities and roles in new cultural contexts, as is the case also for children joining parent sponsors in Ireland and the UK (Marsden, 2018; Rousseau et al., 2004; Suarez-Orozco et al., 2002; Smith et al., 2025). In Ireland, and other states, where separated young people can be sponsors, young people may also be supporting newly arrived family members with settlement, orientation and integration into their new communities (Bergset et al., 2025; Smith et al., 2025).

In EU states that are signatories to the Family Reunion Directive, states must abide by Article 14 of the Directive which states that family members will have the same access to education, employment and training as their sponsors (EMN 2025). Some states also provide specific support for refugees and their family members in terms of language learning and other aspects of integration (EMN, 2025). However, families reunifying are known to face increased risk of poverty and homelessness on reunification (British Red Cross, 2020). Ní Raghallaigh et al. (2025) identify the support needed by young people who are sponsors, while Groarke and Arnold (2018) note the limited capacity of migrant NGOs to provide such support to families reuniting.

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Conclusion and Policy Implications

Research shows that family reunification has a positive impact on the integration experiences of people migrating and seeking refuge and is integral to their wellbeing (EMN, 2025; Löbel and Jacobsen, 2021; Phillimore et al., 2023). Family reunification policy and practice is increasingly varied across Europe and even within the EU. Recent legislative and policy changes in both the UK and Ireland exemplify how states are seeking to restrict family reunification through a range of measures.

In both Ireland and the UK, even before new restrictions are applied, evidence indicates that refugees and their families were struggling with long delays in reunification due to delays in asylum determination, challenges in meeting the eligibility for family reunification, challenges in navigating the application process for family reunification, and delays in processing family reunion applications. In both states, there is also evidence that more support is needed for families after reunification.

Based on this evidence set out in this paper, the following **policy recommendations** are proposed:

- States should reduce waiting times for family reunification applications to prevent harm to the wellbeing of families that is caused by separation and to improve prospects for integration.
- Income and integration requirements should not be applied to refugee family reunification applications, given the additional challenges and time delays these place on people who are already struggling to reestablish their lives following forced displacement.
- Eligibility criteria for family reunification should be reviewed and revised to recognise different cultural understandings and social practices of family formation and relationships.
- The UK should allow separated children to apply as sponsors to enable children and young people to be reunited with their families.

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[i] The Dublin Regulation will be repealed and replaced by the Regulation on Asylum and Migration Management (RAMM) as part of the EU Pact on Asylum and Migration. This will apply from July 2026 onwards (ECRE, 2025).

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