



UNLOCKING POTENTIAL

Pathways to adulthood for unaccompanied children turning 18 in Greece

International Rescue Committee | September 2026



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PHOTOS

Martha Roussou / International Rescue Committee. The photos were taken during participatory workshops with unaccompanied children approaching adulthood in the National Garden, Athens, in 2021. The workshops gathered young people's views, concerns, hopes and aspirations to inform rights-based advocacy grounded in their own experiences and perspectives.

DESIGN

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1. Introduction

The transition to adulthood¹ is one of the most important stages in a young person's life. It is the period during which education, legal status, stable housing, employment opportunities, and supportive relationships shape the foundations for independent adult life. For unaccompanied children,² this transition represents both a significant opportunity and a critical policy moment. When adequately supported, it can lay the foundations for long-term inclusion, self-reliance, and meaningful participation in society. Without appropriate support, however, young people risk renewed vulnerability at the very moment they are expected to become independent.

In the aftermath of the 2015–16 response to the arrival of about one million refugees in Greece, important steps were taken to strengthen the protection and inclusion of unaccompanied children.³ Public authorities, civil society organisations and international partners invested substantial resources in developing specialised child protection systems, expanding accommodation, improving guardianship and creating pathways to education, employment and social inclusion. Alongside these reforms, initiatives were introduced to support young people as they approach adulthood,⁴ recognising that successful integration requires continuity of support beyond childhood.

Today, however, this progress is under increasing pressure. The policy environment has become more restrictive, while protection and integration services have weakened,⁵ due to funding uncertainty, programme interruptions and reductions in available support. Access to a secure

legal status has become dependent on obtaining international protection, with almost no alternative regularisation pathways available for former unaccompanied children who have grown up in Greece. Consequently, a negative asylum decision can leave former unaccompanied children without a realistic legal avenue to remain in the country, regardless of their level of integration, educational achievements or social ties.⁶

At the same time, securing legal status alone does not guarantee a successful transition to adulthood. Even young people granted international protection continue to face significant barriers to securing housing, accessing employment, continuing education, obtaining healthcare and navigating complex administrative procedures. Without coordinated support during this critical period, gains achieved through years of investment in child protection risk being undermined, limiting young people's prospects for independence and meaningful participation in society.

The challenges described in this report should not be understood as reflecting a lack of aspiration, resilience, or potential among former unaccompanied children. Many have spent years rebuilding their lives in Greece, learning the language, attending school, developing skills and preparing for independent adulthood. Rather, the central challenge lies in the absence of continuity between child protection and adult systems.

These challenges highlight the need for a structured and coordinated transition-to-adulthood framework that bridges child and adult protection systems. Such a framework should combine



secure legal pathways with sustained case management, coordinated access to housing, education and employment, and practical preparation for independent living, ensuring that young people are equipped to build stable and productive adult lives.

This report draws on the International Rescue Committee (IRC) Hellas' operational experience and programme data, including supported independent living, employability and social inclusion services for unaccompanied children and young adults, as well as consultations with youth workers, former unaccompanied children, and public authorities. It provides an evidence-based analysis of the barriers young people face when transitioning to adulthood in Greece, examines the limitations of current responses, and sets out recommendations to strengthen sustainable pathways to independence and inclusion.

2. Unaccompanied children approaching adulthood in Greece

Unaccompanied children in Greece make up a significant proportion of asylum-seeking children and face heightened risks of violence, exploitation, trafficking, and abuse throughout their displacement journey.⁷ The majority are already close to adulthood: as of July 2026, there were 1,544 unaccompanied children in accommodation facilities in Greece, of whom over 74% were aged 15–17.⁸ Consequently, the transition to adulthood is not a marginal issue affecting a small subset of children, but a defining stage in the protection journey of most unaccompanied children in the country. For many, this is the point at which responsibility shifts from child protection systems to adult integration and social support mechanisms. How effectively this transition is managed has a profound impact on long-term outcomes.

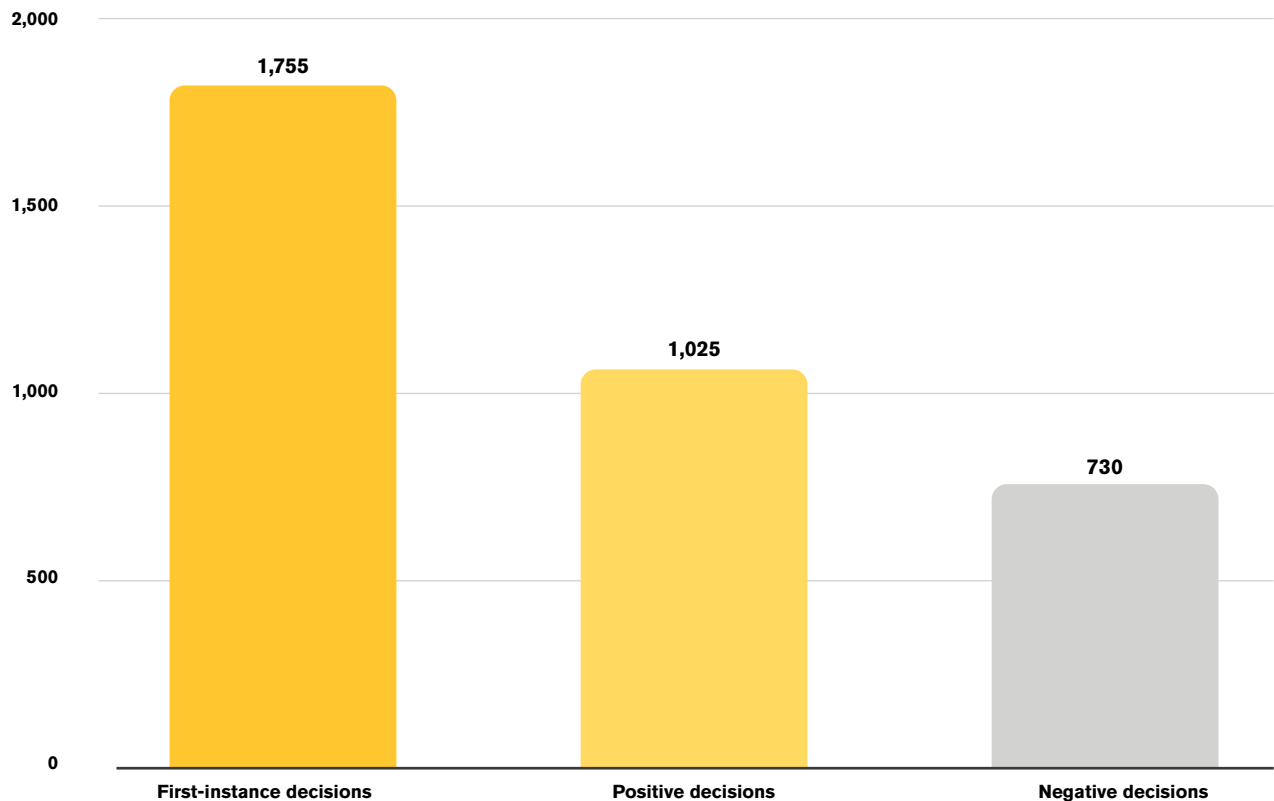
A successful transition to adulthood depends on secure legal status, stable accommodation, access to education and employment, physical and mental wellbeing, and the practical skills needed for independent living. While these elements are closely interconnected, legal status remains particularly important because it determines access to many rights and services after reaching adulthood. However, it is only one component of a successful transition.

Access to international protection has become the primary pathway through which unaccompanied children can secure legal residence after reaching



adulthood. However, available data suggests that this pathway remains uncertain for most. In 2024, 4,710 unaccompanied children applied for asylum in

Fig. 1 First-instance asylum decisions for unaccompanied children in Greece (2024)



Source: Ministry of Migration and Asylum, December 2025 Report.

Greece.⁹ Greek authorities issued 1,755 first-instance decisions, of which 1,000 (57.0%) granted refugee status, 25 (1.4%) subsidiary protection, and 730 (41.6%) were negative.¹⁰ Overall, 1,025 decisions (58.4%) granted international protection. The 2024 figures are the latest complete and comparable dataset. Although 2025 data record 3,502 applications and 449 positive first-instance decisions,¹¹ the number of negative decisions is unavailable, preventing calculation of a comparable recognition rate.

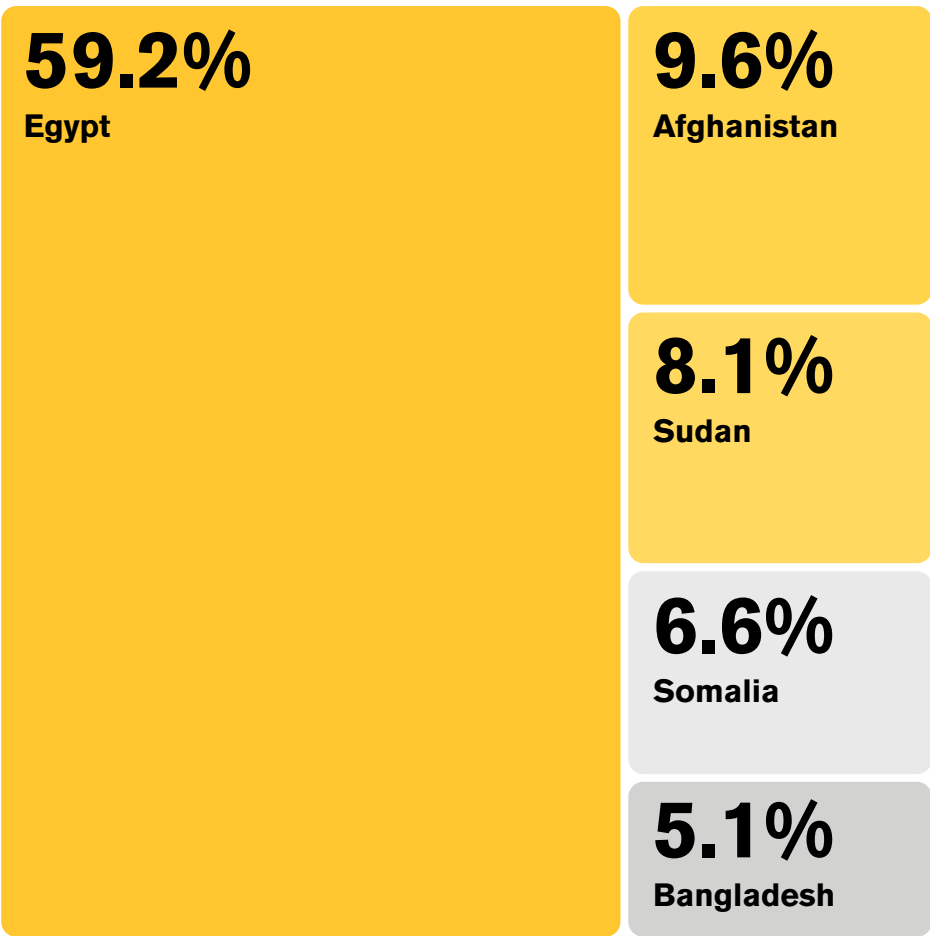
In 2026, most unaccompanied children in Greece originated from Egypt (59.2% of applications), Afghanistan (9.6%), and Sudan (8.1%).¹² However, no disaggregated data is available on recognition rates for asylum applications lodged by unaccompanied children by nationality. Moreover, as asylum procedures are often concluded after

applicants reach adulthood, adult recognition rates provide an indication of likely outcomes. These rates vary significantly by nationality. For example, Egyptian applicants have extremely low recognition rates as adults, at around 0.3% in the first half of 2026, meaning that the overwhelming majority are likely to receive a negative decision.¹³ By contrast, over the same period, recognition rates for applicants from Sudan and Afghanistan stood at 75% and 67%, respectively.¹⁴ As a result, prospects for remaining in Greece after turning 18 depend largely on country of origin rather than factors such as length of stay in Greece, educational achievements, language acquisition, social ties, or preparedness for independent living. This creates a disconnect between child protection efforts aimed at supporting integration and the legal pathways available once young people reach adulthood.

These trends illustrate the uncertainty that many unaccompanied children face as they approach adulthood. While recognition rates currently vary significantly by nationality, they are not static. They may change over time in response to evolving country-of-origin information, jurisprudence, geopolitical developments, and national asylum policies. As a result, even young people from nationalities that currently have relatively high recognition rates cannot assume a secure legal future, making it difficult for both them and the professionals supporting them to plan the transition to adulthood.

At the same time, legal status is only one component of a successful transition. Regardless of the eventual outcome of their asylum claim, all young people approaching adulthood need continuity of support to complete their education, secure stable housing, access employment, navigate administrative procedures and develop the skills needed for independent living. A transition framework focused primarily on asylum outcomes risks overlooking these broader needs and undermining the investments already made in children's protection and integration. Supporting the transition to adulthood should therefore be understood as a continuation of child protection, ensuring that young people are equipped to build stable and productive adult lives, regardless of the outcome of their asylum procedure.

Fig. 2 Main Countries of Origin of Unaccompanied Children in Greece (July 2025 - July 2026)



Source: Ministry of Migration and Asylum, 2026, 'Report A: International Protection - July 2026

3.

Legal and policy framework

Since 2023, the General Secretariat for Vulnerable Persons and Institutional Protection of the Greek Ministry of Migration and Asylum has developed important initiatives aimed at safeguarding unaccompanied children and supporting their transition to autonomy.¹⁵ Programmes such as Helios Junior and PYXIDA, as well as the National Strategy for the Protection of Unaccompanied Minors (2022) recognise and aim to address the need for transition support. However, this commitment has not been translated into a comprehensive legal framework. More recently, the National Strategy for the Protection of Vulnerable Persons includes a provision for integration-oriented accommodation places for former unaccompanied children up to the age of 21.

In practice, the only specific transition provisions are set out in the Framework of Standard Rules for the Operation and Licensing of Accommodation Centres for Unaccompanied Minors, which requires accommodation centres to prepare a departure plan at least two months before a child turns 18. Implementation, however, is left to the discretion of individual facilities, is not systematically monitored or enforced, and does not establish an entitlement to continued support. As a result, transition support remains programme-based rather than rights-based, leading to significant variations in practice.

A comprehensive transition framework would ensure continuity between child protection and adult systems through coordinated planning and sustained support beyond a young person's eighteenth birthday. In Greece, however, access to protection and integration support after adulthood is largely determined by legal status, which typically depends on the outcome of the asylum

procedure.¹⁶ Asylum decisions do not take into account factors such as time spent in Greece, educational attainment, language acquisition, social ties or progress towards independent living. Consequently, young people who have spent formative years in Greece may lose access to rights and support despite significant integration efforts. This creates a clear discontinuity between the child protection framework, based on the best interests of the child, and the adult migration framework, where immigration status becomes the primary determinant of rights and opportunities.



For many young people whose asylum applications are rejected, adulthood results in legal and social invisibility. They lose lawful access to employment, stable housing, education and services, while facing the risk of detention or return despite having spent critical formative years in Greece under the protection of the child welfare system.¹⁷ Although return is often presented as the policy solution, it is frequently neither feasible nor implemented, leaving many young adults in prolonged irregularity without realistic pathways to regularisation or integration.¹⁸

As a result, the legal framework has effectively created two categories: applicants and beneficiaries of international protection, who retain limited access to integration support, and undocumented former unaccompanied children, for whom adulthood may mean an abrupt transition into irregularity and invisibility or the prospect of return. Consequently, many young adults remain in Greece without legal status for extended periods, facing ongoing uncertainty. A strict return-focused approach is therefore impractical and unsustainable. Nor does it reflect the objective of ensuring a successful transition to adulthood for young people who have already benefited from years of protection and integration support. A more effective response would prioritise structured transition pathways, including education, vocational training, and stable residence solutions, that build on existing investments in integration, reduce long-term precarity, and remain consistent with international and European legal standards.

However, there are concerns that returns and detention could expand under evolving policy frameworks. Recent legislative changes have further reshaped the framework governing transition to adulthood and long-term residence prospects for former unaccompanied children.

The “Promotion of Legal Migration Policies”¹⁹ law which entered into force on January 2026,

alongside the law implementing the EU Pact on Migration and Asylum,²⁰ which entered into force in June 2026, have contributed to a tightening and restructuring of available legal pathways. In particular, the ten-year residence permits previously accessible to individuals who had completed three years of secondary education in Greece before the age of 23 was abolished, with eligibility now restricted to those already enrolled under the previous framework. While a ten-year residence permit remains available for individuals completing six years of formal education, this requirement is difficult to meet for most former unaccompanied children due to their age at arrival, language barriers, interrupted educational trajectories, and structural constraints.

These developments significantly weakened one of the few legal pathways that recognised educational participation and integration efforts as relevant factors in determining a young person's future prospects. Although uptake of the three-year education-based permit remained low, with only 159 applications submitted by January 2026,²¹ its existence reflected an important principle, now largely absent from the legal framework: that time spent growing up in Greece and investing in integration should count toward a young person's prospects. At the same time, the recent legislative framework has introduced increased uncertainty around the provision of support to children and young adults without international protection status, with third-party support potentially being interpreted as facilitation of irregular stay.²² Taken together, these legislative developments reinforce a framework in which immigration status increasingly determines transition outcomes, while educational achievement, integration efforts, and the best interests of the child play a diminishing role. The transition to adulthood is therefore treated primarily as a migration management issue rather than as a continuation of child protection. This represents a significant shift away from a framework centred on inclusion, continuity of protection, and long-term self-reliance.

4.

Key challenges in the transition to adulthood

As discussed above, the transition to adulthood for former unaccompanied children is characterised by the absence of a structured transition framework. While legal status plays a critical role in determining access to rights and services, young people face significant challenges across multiple areas regardless of whether they have been granted international protection, are awaiting an asylum decision, or have had their application rejected. Those whose asylum applications have been rejected experience the most acute forms of exclusion, as their transition into adulthood is usually accompanied by the loss of access to accommodation, education, employment pathways, and support services, resulting in prolonged administrative and social invisibility. However, even young people who hold international protection status or whose asylum claims are still pending face significant barriers. Although they generally retain access to basic rights and services, they continue to encounter persistent obstacles in practice and are expected to navigate complex administrative procedures independently.²³ At the age of 18, child-specific protection measures, including guardianship and structured case management, come to an end, yet no equivalent support mechanism is put in place to guide them through the transition to independent adulthood. Unlike most young adults, who continue to rely on family support well beyond the age of 18, former unaccompanied children are expected to manage this transition largely on their own.

Across all aspects of the transition to adulthood, administrative procedures have become a significant barrier to independence. Rather than facilitating

continuity between child and adult systems, administrative requirements frequently create delays, gaps, and circular dependencies that prevent young people from accessing rights to which they are legally entitled to. A clear example is the transition from PAAYPA to AMKA: The temporary social security number (PAAYPA), issued to applicants for international protection during the asylum procedure, must be converted into a standard social security number (AMKA) once international protection is granted. Under the current system, full activation of AMKA requires proof of actual residence in Greece, which can be documented, among other things, through a residential lease, enrollment in school, or employment.²⁴ This creates a circular barrier where access to formal employment and access to social protection systems become mutually dependent, significantly restricting access to healthcare and other social services during a critical stage of transition.^{25 26} This illustrates a broader feature of the current transition framework: young people are expected to navigate multiple administrative systems independently, even though many procedures are interdependent and difficult to complete without sustained guidance or case management.

A successful transition to adulthood depends on three mutually reinforcing foundations: stable accommodation, access to education, and pathways into decent employment. Progress in each of these areas depends on the others and is underpinned by the ability to navigate administrative systems and access appropriate support. The following sections examine these interconnected challenges and their implications for young people's transition to independent adulthood.



a. Accommodation challenges

“Everything starts with housing. Without stable accommodation, they cannot focus on education, vocational training, or securing legal employment, and are more likely to experience social isolation and exploitation.” (IRC Hellas youth worker, 2025)

Housing is the cornerstone of a successful transition to adulthood. It provides the stability needed to pursue education, employment and independent living. Yet, despite years of investment in child-focused accommodation and care, there is currently no structured pathway to stable housing once unaccompanied children reach adulthood. While some NGOs provide short-term support, these initiatives remain limited, project-based and dependent on uncertain

funding. As a result, many young people experience a sharp break in support at the point when continuity is most needed.²⁷

The recently adopted [National Strategy for the Protection of Vulnerable Persons](#) recognises this need, envisaging supported accommodation and integration services for former unaccompanied children aged 18–21 to facilitate their transition to independent living. However, as of July 2026, no specific programmes or funding allocations had been announced to implement this provision, leaving it unclear how and when it will be put into practice.

Upon reaching adulthood, former unaccompanied children must leave child-specific accommodation, with limited exceptions for those still in formal education.^{28 29} With Helios Junior having suspended new applications since January 2026, both young people who have been granted international protection and those whose asylum applications are pending have lost a key housing support option and, in the absence of any other available programme, are left to secure accommodation on their own.³⁰ Without support from Helios Junior, young asylum seekers may be transferred to open reception facilities that are often overcrowded, located far from urban centres, and shared with adult populations. This represents a significant deterioration in living conditions and access to services compared with child-focused accommodation. Those whose asylum claims are rejected enter an irregular situation, with no legal pathway to regularise their stay and exposure to detention or return. Rather than providing a gradual transition towards independent living, the current framework frequently replaces child-centred accommodation with less stable and less appropriate alternatives, leaving many young people to navigate adulthood without a sustainable housing solution.

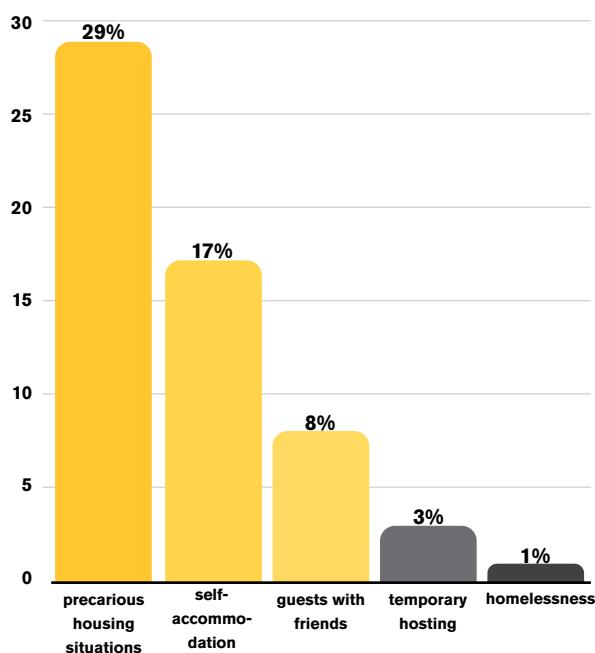
Temporary extensions in shelters or SIL apartments may be granted for young people enrolled in formal education or vocational training until the end of the school year, provided they regularly attend classes. These extensions provide



valuable flexibility but remain temporary and do not offer a sustainable pathway beyond the end of the academic year.

IRC Hellas' operational experience suggests that many young people seek to avoid homelessness or relocation to camps by arranging informal accommodation, often sharing overcrowded apartments with friends or acquaintances. Among the 381 young people supported through the "Kypseli – Bridge to the Future" programme funded by UNHCR (2023 – 2025), many of whom were unaccompanied or former unaccompanied children, nearly one-third (29%) were living in precarious housing situations at the time of enrollment, including self-accommodation with roommates or alone (17%), staying as guests with friends (8%), temporary hosting (3%), or homelessness (1%). Many young people avoid camp accommodation because conditions disrupt education, limit access to services, and undermine the stability and relationships they had built in child-focused care.³¹

Fig. 3 Housing Status of Youth (18-24 years old) Supported by the IRC Hellas "Kypseli" Programme (2023–2025) at the Time of their Enrolment - total of 381 Clients



Source: IRC Hellas "Kypseli" Programme 2023-2025.

Young people are expected to enter a private housing market for which they are structurally unprepared. Access to housing is further complicated by the broader housing crisis affecting the general population.³² Rents in urban centres are often unaffordable, while the supply of affordable housing remains limited.³³ In addition, landlords typically require documentation such as a tax number (AFM), bank account, proof of income, and advance payments including deposits and several months' rent.³⁴ Most young people turning 18 do not possess these documents or financial resources due to administrative delays and ongoing asylum procedures. Access to housing is further constrained, in some cases, by discriminatory practices towards migrants and refugees.

IRC Hellas' experience implementing Supported Independent Living (SIL) programmes in Athens illustrates these challenges: even when funding was available, identifying apartments that met legal, safety, and accessibility standards proved difficult due to limited housing availability, rapidly increasing rents, the predominance of older buildings requiring maintenance, and, in some cases, local opposition to programme apartments.

Without stable accommodation, progress in education, employment, language acquisition, and social integration is difficult to sustain. Housing is therefore not simply one element of the transition to adulthood but its foundation. Ensuring continuity of housing support should therefore be understood as a core component of the transition from child protection to adulthood.

b. Labour market challenges

“It is not easy to find a job here in Athens, especially if you are black. I am talking about legal jobs.” (Participant in IRC FGD with young refugees and asylum seekers aged 18–23, 2024)

Access to safe and sustainable employment is a key component of a successful transition to adulthood, providing young people with the means to achieve financial independence, secure housing and participate fully in society. In Greece, however, former unaccompanied children face multiple barriers to entering the labour market. Administrative obstacles, unstable housing, language gaps, limited skills development and discrimination combine to hinder access to safe and fairly remunerated employment.³⁵

For many young people, the pressure to secure income begins well before they turn 18.³⁶ Anticipating the abrupt withdrawal of child-specific support, many feel compelled to secure an income while still children to prepare for independent living.³⁷ As an IRC SIL staff member highlighted: “given the circumstances (i.e. the insufficient amount of cash assistance and the limited prospects of finding legal employment after leaving SIL), the programme team does not insist

that children quit their jobs. Instead, they are satisfied when a child finds work under decent conditions. Staff ensures that children are not exposed to exploitative labour conditions” (IRC Hellas SIL Coordinator, 2023).

The pressure to become financially independent before turning 18 frequently leads young people into irregular and exploitative work in sectors such as construction and agriculture, often under unsafe conditions.³⁸ In the worst cases, the absence of protection exposes children to smuggling and trafficking networks, particularly when they experience homelessness or work in unregulated sectors.^{39 40 41} Rather than functioning as a pathway towards independence, early labour market participation may therefore expose children to further protection risks.

Recent initiatives, such as traineeship programmes,⁴² provide opportunities. However, placements are limited to a narrow set of sectors,⁴³ primarily agriculture, construction, tourism, and programmes specifically targeting women. While these programmes provide valuable opportunities, they do not yet constitute a comprehensive transition pathway capable of supporting young people with diverse aspirations, educational backgrounds, and career goals.

Administrative barriers also limit access to formal employment. Former unaccompanied children frequently face delays in obtaining a residence permit, a tax number (AFM), and social security registration (AMKA).⁴⁴ Practical obstacles are common: appointment systems are often slow, difficult to navigate, and characterised by long waiting periods, and opening a bank account is complicated by due diligence requirements that do not align with their legal status.⁴⁵ For those who receive negative asylum decisions upon turning 18, the transition to adulthood effectively becomes a transition to irregular status, preventing access to legal employment, exposing them to the risk of deportation, and increasing their vulnerability to



exploitation and other forms of abuse. These barriers delay labour market entry at precisely the point when young people are expected to become financially independent.

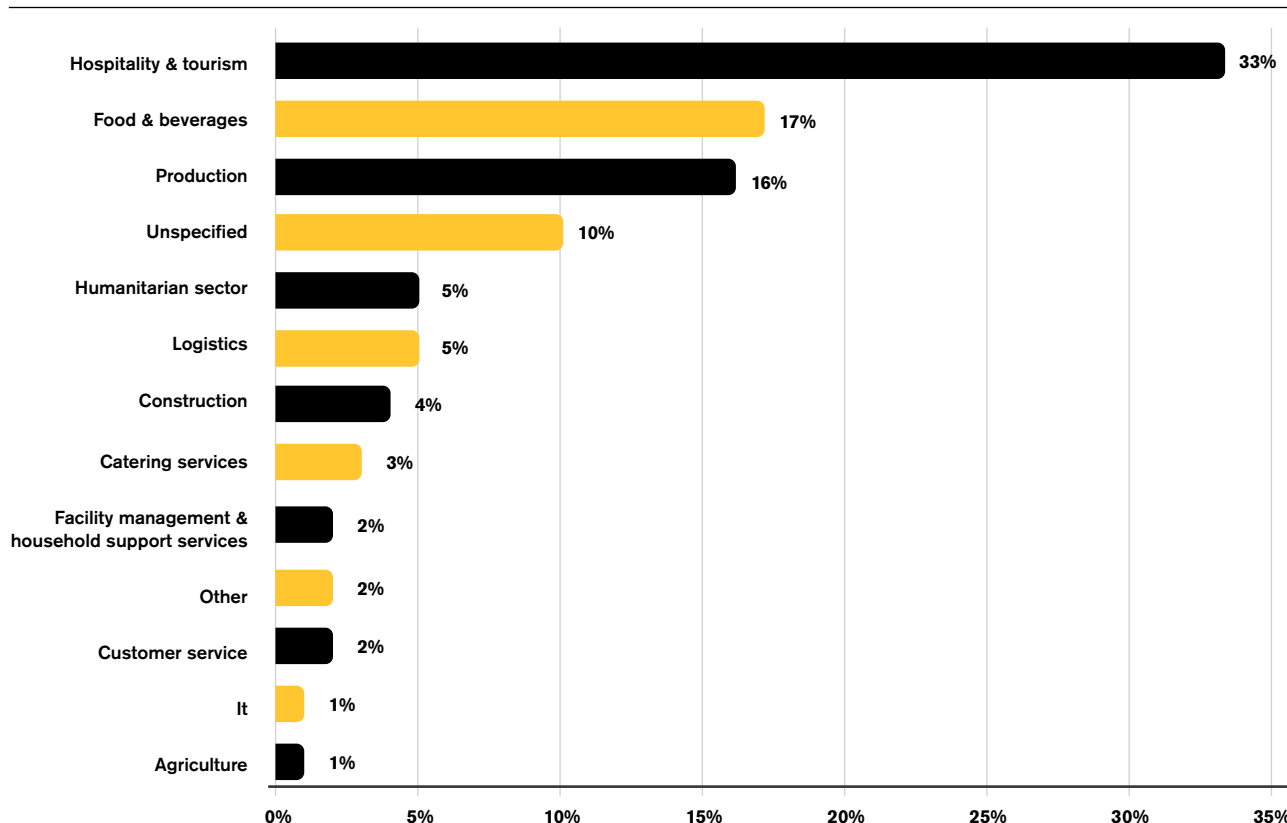
Language and skills barriers further compound these challenges. IRC data from focus group discussions with programme staff show that limited Greek language proficiency is consistently identified as one of the main obstacles to employment faced by former unaccompanied children. This is further reflected in IRC Hellas' 2024 PROCEED Project Youth Questionnaire, where half of respondents (9 out of 18) reported "difficulties with the language" among the main challenges in accessing the labour market. Many young people also have had limited opportunities to develop soft skills, digital literacy, familiarity with workplace culture, and professional networks because of disrupted education and prolonged displacement. Limited knowledge of labour rights

and job-search strategies further reduces their ability to navigate the labour market.⁴⁶

Discrimination and racism also play a role. Employer reluctance to hire refugees⁴⁷, combined with Greece's generally high youth unemployment rate,⁴⁸ further limits access to stable employment.⁴⁹ Taken together, these barriers significantly reduce young people's prospects of achieving sustainable economic independence, despite their willingness to work and contribute to society. Employment is therefore not only a labour market issue but a key determinant of whether the transition to adulthood leads to inclusion or prolonged precarity.

As one young person supported by the IRC observed: "You are not given the chance to use your knowledge. I know many people who have done everything here but, in the end, they were obliged to leave."

Fig. 4 Employment Sectors of Youth (18-24 years old) Supported by the IRC Hellas "Kypseli" Programme (2023–2025) - total of 381 Clients



Source: IRC Hellas "Kypseli" Programme 2023-2025

c. Education challenges

“The transition is too abrupt. If you don't know the language or have legal status, it's almost impossible to continue education.” (Participant in IRC FGD with young refugees and asylum seekers aged 18–23, 2024)

Greek legislation guarantees access to public education for all children and young people, including asylum seekers and refugees, and students cannot be excluded solely because they turn 18.^{50 51} However, while the legal right to education continues into adulthood, the practical conditions that enable young people to remain in education often do not. As a result, educational continuity frequently becomes one of the first casualties of an unsupported transition to adulthood.

Many young adults express strong interest in education, vocational training, and skills development. However, participation depends on stable housing, legal certainty, financial stability, access to language programmes and personalised guidance. Without these conditions, continuing education often becomes unrealistic despite young people's strong motivation to learn.

Language barriers are particularly significant. IRC employability programme data from 2019–2025 show that 75% of 696 young people aged 18–24 had no or very limited Greek language skills at enrolment, while only 4% had advanced proficiency or fluency. English proficiency is also limited, with 35% reporting beginner-level or no knowledge.

Low prior educational attainment further complicates participation. IRC Hellas data show that among 381 young adults aged 18–24 who enrolled in integration programmes between 2023 and 2025, only 4% had completed upper secondary education and 2% lower secondary education, while 15% had never attended school either in Greece or in their countries of origin. In practice, there is limited continuity between compulsory education and adult education or vocational pathways once young people reach 18, leaving many without a clear route to continue their learning.

Economic pressures also push many young people to prioritise employment over education, as they need to survive and, in some cases, support family members in their countries of origin.⁵² Without a social safety net, those who wish to continue their studies often have to combine education with work, yet securing legal employment compatible with school schedules is extremely difficult.⁵³ For many, the transition to adulthood becomes a choice between education and survival rather than an opportunity to combine learning with gradual entry into the labour market.

Early entry into the labour market further reinforces this pattern. Greek labour law permits children



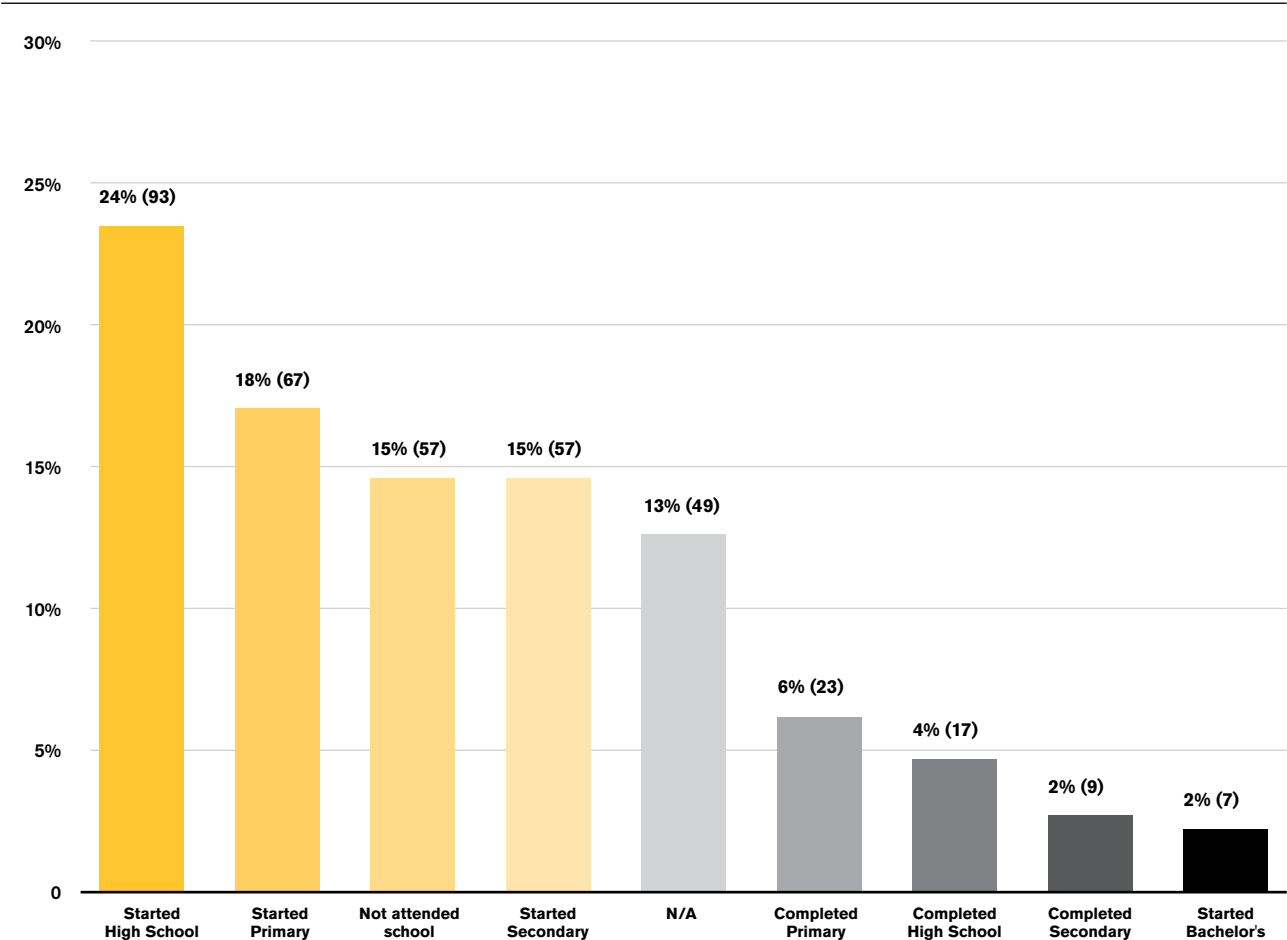
aged 15 and over with legal documentation to work with parental or guardian consent, and many young people begin working while still underage.⁵⁴ For some, this provides valuable work experience and an opportunity to develop practical skills. However, in the absence of a structured transition framework and adequate financial support, employment often becomes a necessity rather than a complement to education. As a result, early labour market participation may interrupt educational pathways, normalise the prioritisation of immediate income over longer-term educational goals, and make re-engagement with formal education after the age of 18 increasingly difficult.

Finally, legal uncertainty undermines incentives to invest in education. Youth workers report that

many young people are aware of the limited likelihood of obtaining international protection after turning 18, which can discourage investment in long-term education and language acquisition when they are uncertain whether they will be allowed to remain in Greece.⁵⁵

Educational aspirations are therefore often interrupted not by a lack of motivation or ambition, but by structural barriers linked to housing, legal status, economic insecurity and the absence of coordinated transition support. Ensuring continuity in education should therefore be understood as a central component of the transition to adulthood, enabling young people to develop the skills, qualifications, and confidence needed for long-term inclusion and independence.

Fig. 5 Educational Level of Youth (18-24 years old) Supported by the IRC Hellas “Kypseli” Programme (2023–2025) at the Time of their Enrolment - total of 381 Clients



Source: IRC Hellas “Kypseli” Programme 2023-2025

5.

Current policy and programme responses

Existing initiatives supporting unaccompanied children's transition to adulthood represent important efforts to address critical protection and integration needs in Greece. However, most remain project-based and time-limited, preventing them from providing sustained support to all young people transitioning to adulthood.

a. Helios Junior, launched in October 2024 by the Ministry of Migration and Asylum and implemented by IOM and partners, aims to support the transition to independent living through accommodation, counselling, integration planning, and access to education and employment services.⁵⁶ While its design reflects the need for structured, long-term support and could address key transition challenges, its reach remains limited. Despite a target capacity of 1,000 beneficiaries at a time (2,000 in total), by April 2026, only 413 individuals had accessed the programme.⁵⁷ Moreover, applications have been suspended since the end of January 2026, except for certain cases involving vulnerable individuals while the programme is currently scheduled to end in May 2027.^{58 59} The programme demonstrates the importance and added value of structured support during the transition to adulthood. However, its limited scope and the suspension of new applications mean that it cannot currently serve as a comprehensive and sustainable national framework for supporting young people after the age of 18.

b. Supported Independent Living (SIL) apartments are among the most effective models for preparing unaccompanied children for adulthood.⁶⁰ Designed for adolescents aged 16–18, they provide small-scale accommodation



combined with multidisciplinary support, including psychosocial care, education, and life skills development. Evidence from IRC Hellas SIL programmes shows strong outcomes, with improved autonomy and life skills among participants:⁶¹ 93% of former IRC SIL residents surveyed from 2019 to 2024 reported that their life improved after living in SIL apartments. Monitoring tools also confirmed improvements in independent living skills among participants.

“ In SIL I learned how to keep my house clean and myself clean, which was very helpful for my life afterwards. In the apartment, we were fewer people than

in the camp and I cooked what I wanted and I made friends”. (former IRC SIL resident, boy from Pakistan, 2024)

Monitoring results indicate that structured, supported pathways before the transition phase can play a decisive role in strengthening long-term stability and integration. As of July 2026, there are 60 SIL apartments for unaccompanied children in Greece, providing 238 places.⁶² Despite these positive outcomes, SIL illustrates one of the central shortcomings identified throughout this report: while significant investment is made in preparing young people for adulthood, structured support largely ends when they turn 18. The absence of guaranteed follow-up risks undermining many of the gains achieved during the preparation phase.

c. The Mentoring Project implemented by the Ministry of Migration and Asylum with EUAA support, connects young adults aged 18–23 with trained peers who provide guidance and emotional support during the transition to adulthood.⁶³ From 2021 to December 2023, the project reached over 1,385 people through field visits, school sessions, workshops, sports activities, and psychosocial interventions.⁶⁴ By leveraging lived experience, the project promotes peer learning and social inclusion.⁶⁵ Peer mentoring can therefore complement, but not replace, structured transition support capable of addressing the legal, administrative and socio-economic barriers young people face.

d. The Pyxida Project supports continuity of care beyond the standard child protection system, by providing access to specialised, multidisciplinary services.⁶⁶ Implemented by the Ministry of Migration and Asylum in cooperation with partner CSOs, it addresses the complex needs of unaccompanied children and young adults. Through five centres nationwide, Pyxida provides mental health and legal services, educational support and career guidance, and facilitation of meetings with guardians.⁶⁷ For young adults aged 18–21, it also offers legal representation and comprehensive support for

transition planning, including psychosocial guidance, employment access, housing assistance, and individualised life planning.⁶⁸ As of June 2026, more than 5,240 participants had received services.⁶⁹ Pyxida demonstrates the value of multidisciplinary transition support but, as a project rather than a permanent component of the national system, it cannot by itself ensure continuity of support for all young people approaching adulthood.

e. The Guardianship System is a state obligation that plays a critical role in preparing unaccompanied children for adulthood. Guardians are well placed to support individualised transition planning, including access to education, vocational training, and administrative procedures. However, this support ends at 18, without a comparable system of follow-up guidance for young adults. At the same time, the system could be further leveraged during the preparatory phase before adulthood, particularly to support gradual transition planning, access to education and the labour market, and the timely completion of key administrative procedures. Strengthening coordination between guardianship and existing accommodation, integration and employability initiatives could contribute to greater continuity between child protection and adult systems, within the limits of the current legal framework. In this way, guardianship could serve not only as a child protection mechanism, but also as an important bridge towards independent adulthood.

Taken together, these initiatives demonstrate that many of the key components of an effective transition framework already exist in Greece. Supported accommodation, mentoring, multidisciplinary case management, guardianship and integration support have all shown positive results. The challenge is therefore not the absence of promising models, but the absence of a coherent framework that connects them, guarantees continuity beyond the age of 18 and ensures consistent access irrespective of project funding or geographical location.



6.

The case for investing in successful transitions

A well-coordinated transition from childhood to adulthood is not only essential for safeguarding the rights and wellbeing of former unaccompanied children but also represents a sound investment in Greece's social and economic future. By enabling young people to move successfully from protection to independence, structured transition measures help ensure that investments made during childhood translate into long-term inclusion, self-reliance and participation in society. Linking education, vocational training, employment, accommodation and legal support enables young people to build independent lives and contribute to their communities and the economy.⁷⁰ As an IRC job counselor noted: “whether young people are seen as a burden or a solution depends largely on the level of planning and support provided at the transition stage.”

Effective transition frameworks are, first and foremost, a protection measure. Stable housing, legal guidance, access to education, and pathways to employment reduce exposure to homelessness, labour exploitation, trafficking, and other forms of harm that young people may face when leaving care without adequate support. By ensuring continuity of support beyond the age of 18, transition measures help preserve the gains achieved through years of investment in child protection and reduce the likelihood that young people will experience homelessness, exploitation, irregularity or social exclusion.

From an economic perspective, effective transitions can help address labour shortages.⁷¹ According to data collected for the European Labour Authority (2025), Greece is experiencing



significant shortages across multiple sectors, including construction, care, transport, and services.⁷² These are sectors in which many young people already possess relevant experience or could contribute through targeted training and support. When provided with pathways to legal employment, young people who arrived as unaccompanied children can contribute to

productivity, tax revenues, and social security systems, while reducing reliance on informal and potentially exploitative forms of work.⁷³ Supporting the transition to adulthood should therefore be seen not only as a social policy measure, but also as an investment in workforce participation and long-term economic resilience.

The social benefits are equally significant. Access to employment, education, and stable housing enable regular interaction with the wider community and create opportunities for participation in social and civic life. When young refugees participate as workers, students, trainees, volunteers and neighbors, opportunities for everyday contact increase, contributing to stronger social cohesion, mutual understanding and more inclusive forms of coexistence.⁷⁴ Successful transitions therefore benefit not only individual young people but also the communities in which they live, strengthening social cohesion.

The positive impact of structured transition support is reflected in IRC Hellas' operational experience. Young adults who receive guidance on administrative procedures, housing, education, and employment are better prepared for independent living and less likely to experience homelessness, exploitation, or social exclusion.⁷⁵ Evidence from IRC programmes, including Supported Independent Living (SIL) and the "Kypseli" livelihood support programme, demonstrates that integrated interventions combining psychosocial support, life skills development, education and employment assistance, contribute to improved autonomy, increased access to housing and employment, and higher participation in education. Under the Kypseli project, 381 beneficiaries received employment counselling, while 86 secured formal employment and 37 enrolled in formal education. These findings demonstrate that effective transition support delivers tangible benefits for both young people and society. It should therefore be regarded not as a temporary integration measure, but as a core component of an effective child protection and inclusion system.

The evidence presented throughout this report suggests that the challenge is not the absence of effective approaches but embedding them in a coherent and sustainable national transition framework.

7.

Conclusion

The transition to adulthood for unaccompanied children in Greece is not simply an administrative milestone, but a defining moment that determines whether young people are able to build stable, independent lives or are pushed into precarity and exclusion. Throughout this report, evidence from IRC Hellas programmes, consultations with youth workers and young people, and national data demonstrates both the remarkable resilience of these adolescents and the systemic barriers they continue to face. Like any young person, they must navigate education, identity and the uncertainties of adulthood. Yet they do so while carrying the additional burden of displacement, trauma, dangerous journeys and separation from family, alongside the challenge of adapting to a new country, language and unfamiliar administrative, education, employment and housing systems, often entirely alone.

As noted at the outset, the central challenge is not a lack of resilience, aspiration or potential among former unaccompanied children, many of whom have spent years rebuilding their lives in Greece. Rather, the transition to adulthood is too often characterised by an abrupt break in support between child protection and adult systems. As a result, many young people encounter legal uncertainty, housing insecurity, barriers to education and employment, and complex administrative procedures at precisely the moment they are expected to become self-reliant. Too often, progress achieved through years of investment in child protection and integration is placed at risk, leaving young people vulnerable to irregularity, homelessness, exploitative labour and social exclusion.

A more inclusive and forward-looking approach, centred on continuity of support, legal stability, education, housing and employment opportunities, would benefit not only former unaccompanied children, but Greek society as a whole. Supporting the transition to adulthood should therefore be understood not as an extension of child protection, but as successful completion of it. Strengthening continuity between child protection and adult systems is not only essential for safeguarding young people's rights but also represents a more effective and sustainable investment in Greece's future.

8.

Recommendations for supporting the transition to adulthood of former unaccompanied children

Drawing on IRC Hellas' operational experience, consultations with young people, and the evidence presented in this report, these recommendations aim to strengthen the transition to adulthood by ensuring continuity between child protection and adult systems. They promote a coordinated, cross-sectoral approach that links legal status, education, housing, employment, and social inclusion, enabling young people to move from protection to independent adulthood. Rather than creating new parallel structures, the recommendations build on existing initiatives and seek to strengthen coordination, continuity and long-term sustainability within the current system.

1. LEGAL & ADMINISTRATIVE SUPPORT

We ask the Ministry of Migration and Asylum to:

- **Establish a formal national transition-to-adulthood framework** as an overarching structure encompassing child protection and integration programmes, ensuring coverage and coherence across services. The framework should provide a coordinated pathway from child protection to independent adulthood, beginning before young people reach the age of 18 and ensuring continuity of support afterwards, while complementing and reinforcing the current Framework of Standard Rules for the Operation and Licensing of Accommodation Centres for Unaccompanied Minors, supported by systematic monitoring. The framework should:
 - Introduce formal and compulsory **individualised transition plans starting**

at least 6 months before age 18, with regular reviews and implementation after adulthood where necessary, covering housing pathways, administrative documentation and legal support, continuation of education and training, and preparation for employment.

- Ensure **uninterrupted access to key administrative documentation** before and after the age of 18, including timely conversion of PAAYPA to AMKA, issuance of an AFM, and removal of administrative barriers that create circular dependencies between access to employment, social protection and healthcare.
- Establish a structured transition **case management system**, beginning before the age of 18 and continuing throughout the transition to independent adulthood, with regular follow-up, referral mechanisms, and coordination among relevant services to support young people in accessing housing, education, employment, healthcare, and legal assistance.
- Introduce **structured civic education and labour rights preparation prior to adulthood**, integrated into child protection and education settings.
- Incorporate and fund a **monitoring system** to track transition outcomes, including housing stability at 6 and 12 months after turning 18, participation in education and training, employment outcomes, continuity of legal status procedures, and long-term wellbeing. This system should also monitor outcomes from all NGO-led programmes.



- **Reintroduce the 10-year residence permit for unaccompanied children who complete at least three years of education in Greece** before age 23, abolished by Law 5275/2026 and expand eligibility to higher education and vocational training.

- **Extend “tolerated stay” status until age 21 for all unaccompanied children**, regardless of the outcome of their asylum application, ensuring protection, access to services, and smooth transition. This aligns with practices in other EU countries such as Spain, where former unaccompanied children are granted, renewable residence permits and supported through a phased transition into independent legal status and adulthood.

- **Develop new pathways to long-term legal residence** based on completion of secondary or vocational education in Greece, sustained participation in training or employment and demonstrated integration over time.

- **Strengthen the role of guardians in transition planning** by requiring them to initiate and coordinate individual transition plans before young people reach the age of 18, in collaboration with accommodation providers, education services and integration actors.

2. HOUSING & INTEGRATION SUPPORT

We ask the Ministry of Migration and Asylum to:

- **Guarantee continuity of housing support for at least 6–12 months after turning 18**, including through the implementation of the supported accommodation measures envisaged in the [National Strategy for the Protection of Vulnerable Persons](#), avoiding unnecessary transfers that disrupt education, employment and established support networks.
- **Support and finance Supported Independent Living facilities for ages 18–21**, separate from those for children aged 16–18. These should combine accommodation with



tailored integration support, including education, vocational training, employment guidance, and legal assistance.

- **Maintain and scale up existing integration programmes** (e.g. Helios Junior, Pyxida, SIL), ensuring **multi-year funding stability and increased capacity planning, as part of a national transition framework.**

3. EDUCATION & SKILLS DEVELOPMENT

We ask the Ministry of Education, Religious Affairs and Sports to:

- **Ensure sustained access to intensive Greek language learning before and after the age of 18**, recognising language proficiency as a prerequisite for continued education, employment and independent living.
- **Ensure flexible education pathways that enable young people to combine education with part-time employment** without losing access to training and qualification opportunities. This should include flexible bridging programmes for young people aged 18–21, offering evening classes or part-time study options, intensive Greek language courses, preparatory courses for higher

education, and personalised academic guidance and mentoring.

- **Develop, in collaboration with Ministry of Labour, fairly compensated, skills-oriented internship programmes across a wide range of sectors**, expanding on current provisions. Internships should reflect young people's skills, interests, and career aspirations, cover diverse sectors beyond low-skilled labour, allow flexible hours to continue education and be explicitly linked to educational engagement.

4. EMPLOYMENT & ECONOMIC INTEGRATION

We ask the Ministry of Migration and Asylum, in collaboration with the Ministry of Labour to:

- **Ensure that career guidance, work-readiness training and links with employers begin before young people leave child protection services**, enabling a gradual transition into employment.
- **Ensure that Public Employment Service (DYPA) systems are fully accessible to young refugees** and asylum seekers, including eligibility for counselling, job matching, and reskilling support upon registration.
- **Strengthen labour inspections and outreach** in sectors where young refugees are at heightened risk of exploitation, alongside accessible multilingual reporting mechanisms and clear referral pathways to enforcement authorities.
- **Coordinate with relevant authorities to remove administrative barriers to documentation** (e.g., delays in issuing or renewing permits, tax or insurance numbers) that prevent timely access to legal employment.
- Introduce **employer incentives (e.g. wage subsidies or social security contribution support for a defined period)** linked to legal employment of young people transitioning to adulthood.

5. COMMUNITY & SOCIAL INCLUSION

We ask Regional and Local Authorities to:

- **Facilitate structured labour market access for entry-level jobs through job fairs, career events, and job matching services** in both major cities and smaller regions, in collaboration with Public Employment Service (DYPA) and private sector partners.
- **Develop inclusive sports, arts, and cultural programmes for all members of the local community**, ensuring that activities are accessible to refugees and asylum seekers through measures such as multilingual information, culturally sensitive approaches, accessible venues and other practical measures to promote participation.

We ask Private sector partners to:

- **Develop inclusive employment pathways for young refugees and asylum-seeking adults**, combining traineeships, entry-level roles, mentoring, and gradual integration into the workplace.

6. COORDINATION, MONITORING & EVIDENCE

We ask all responsible authorities and implementing actors to:

- Institutionalise **coordination between child protection and adult integration systems** through formal referral pathways, shared transition planning and continuity of case management before and after the age of 18, regardless of legal status where possible.
- **Systematically document and evaluate transition outcomes** from all relevant programmes (housing, employment, education, integration) to inform policy and funding decisions.
- **Publish annual data on transition outcomes** to support transparency, accountability and evidence-based policy development.

Endnotes

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