



**Round Table Summary on
Orphanage Volunteerism and
Action Plan**

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1. Introduction & Purpose

This handbook will serve as a guide for Time to Help (UK) staff, partners, and volunteers. It is written around the evolving ethical landscape of "Orphanage Volunteering" and aims to help in establishing a framework for protecting children's rights while maintaining impactful international support.

This guide is informed by the key insights and outcomes from our **Round Table Discussion held on 20 April 2026 at Alliance House, London.**

- **Host:** Time to Help (UK)
- **Panel Experts:** Olivia Barker White (Kids Club Kampala), Ridwana Wallace-Laher (Islamic Help), Dr. Nelly Ali (UCL Institute of Education), and Intiaz Patel (Help Yateem).

2. Purpose of the Discussion

This round table discussion was convened to explore the evolving debate around ***orphanage volunteerism*** and the ethical considerations associated with international volunteering in residential care settings.

Recent developments within the NGO and international development sectors have raised concerns regarding the potential unintended consequences of orphanage volunteering, including issues relating to safeguarding, child protection, and systemic incentives for institutionalisation.

The session aimed to:

- Examine current perspectives on orphanage volunteerism
- Understand the structural role of residential care institutions
- Review emerging sector guidance and best practices
- Explore potential policy implications for our organisation's future engagement

3. Participants and Speakers

The panel brought together professionals with expertise in international development, child welfare, and ethical volunteering.

Speakers

- Olivia Barker White – Co-Founder & CEO, Kids Club Kampala
- Ridwana Wallace-Laher – Director of Growth, Islamic Help
- Dr. Nelly Ali – Lecturer in Childhood Studies and Children’s Rights, UCL Institute of Education
- Imtiaz Patel – Director of Development, Help Yateem

Attendees:

A select group of invited participants representing organisations working within international development, volunteering, and child welfare and Time to Help Staff

4. Context and Background

Within the international development and charity sector, orphanages have historically played an important role in providing care, shelter, education, and protection for vulnerable children.

However, increasing research and sector dialogue have highlighted concerns regarding:

- The growth of orphanage tourism
- The institutionalisation of children who may have living family members
- Potential psychological and developmental impacts on children
- Risks linked to unregulated volunteer engagement

These concerns have prompted organisations globally to reassess the ethics and long-term impact of orphanage volunteer programmes.

5. Key Themes from the Discussion

This section outlines the main themes that emerged from the panel discussion.

5.1 Role and Function of Orphanages

A central theme was the recognition that many children in orphanages are not without family. In numerous cases, children have at least one living parent or extended family member, with separation often driven by poverty rather than absence of caregivers.

It was argued that institutional care, even when well-intentioned, may be inherently detrimental to children's development. A lack of consistent, long-term caregivers can disrupt attachment formation and emotional stability. The frequent turnover of volunteers and staff may further contribute to cycles of attachment and loss.

However, it was also acknowledged that, in certain contexts, short-term institutional care may be necessary as an emergency response where children face immediate risk or lack alternative support.

5.2 Impact of International Volunteering

The discussion acknowledged that short-term international volunteering in orphanages can have unintended negative consequences.

At the same time, it was emphasised that international volunteering does not need to be entirely rejected. **When carefully structured, it can contribute positively through indirect support such as logistics, administration, fundraising, or skills-based contributions.**

***Core Distinction:** Ethical models position volunteers as supporters of local systems rather than replacements for trained caregivers, prioritising the needs of the child over the experience of the volunteer.*

5.3 Risks and Ethical Concerns

- **Safeguarding:** Significant concerns were identified regarding inadequate vetting, lack of training, and insufficient supervision of volunteers, which can expose children to harm.

- **Financial Incentives:** Funding structures reliant on donations and volunteer fees may unintentionally encourage the continued institutionalisation of children.
- **Structural Power:** Power imbalances and colonial perspectives within international development may shape assumptions about care without sufficient consideration of local contexts.
- **Child Rights:** Care should extend beyond basic needs (food/shelter) to include stability, meaningful relationships, and participation in decisions.

5.4 Examples of Good Practice

- Prioritising family-based care, with efforts focused on keeping children within their biological or extended families wherever possible.
- Implementing reintegration programmes, where children in institutional care are supported to safely return to their families.
- Using foster care systems as an alternative when reunification is not possible.
- Providing short-term emergency support (e.g. shelter, medical care, counselling) alongside clear plans for long-term placement.
- Ensuring rigorous safeguarding practices, including background checks, training, and ongoing supervision of staff.
- Limiting volunteer roles to indirect or supervised support, rather than direct caregiving.
- Promoting community-based approaches, where support is delivered within local environments rather than institutions.
- Conducting home visits, monitoring, and follow-ups to ensure children's ongoing safety and wellbeing.
- Valuing local expertise and leadership, with trained local staff leading care and decision-making.
- Focusing on long-term outcomes for children, rather than short-term outputs or volunteer experience.

5.5 Sector Trends and Policy Developments

Examples of alternative approaches were presented, particularly those prioritising family-based and community-led care models. These approaches aim to prevent unnecessary separation and support children within their existing social environments.

One example included programmes that provide emergency care alongside active efforts to reintegrate children with their families. Where reunification is not possible, foster care arrangements are utilised as a longer-term solution.

Organisations adopting these models typically implement robust safeguarding measures, including thorough vetting of staff, ongoing monitoring, and clear accountability structures. There is also a strong emphasis on local expertise and long-term sustainability.

6. Key Takeaways

- Additional perspectives during the discussion emphasised the importance of approaching orphanage volunteerism through a **child-centred and rights-based** lens informed by childhood studies.

From this standpoint, children are not simply passive recipients of charity or services, but social actors whose lives are shaped by wider social, economic, and policy structures including poverty, inequality, and access to social protection.

This approach shifts the focus from asking how volunteers can help towards examining what types of care arrangements best uphold children's rights to family life, stability, dignity, and meaningful participation.

- Participants noted that conversations about orphanages often focus on individual narratives such as children being abandoned or having nowhere to go.

While these stories reflect real hardship, a wider structural lens suggests that family separation is often linked to poverty, limited social protection systems, or policy gaps rather than the absence of family members.

In many contexts children in residential care may still have extended family networks who face significant economic or social pressure.

- Another theme raised during the discussion was the importance of recognising children as active participants in their own lives rather than passive recipients of care.

Considering children's perspectives raises questions about how they experience repeated interactions with short-term volunteers.

Even when those interactions are positive, the cycle of forming attachments and then experiencing separation when volunteers leave may have implications for emotional wellbeing and stability.

- Participants reflected on several ethical tensions within orphanage volunteerism.

One discussion focused on the difference between an ethics of care, where individuals are motivated by compassion and the desire to help, and an ethics of impact, which asks what the longer-term consequences of these interactions may be for children.

Ethical considerations were also discussed at the level of systems and organisations. Institutional care models can shape funding flows, organisational incentives, and public expectations over time. In some cases, institutions may attract more funding because they are more visible to donors and volunteers, while preventative measures such as family support or community-based services may receive less attention.

- Children's perspectives should be actively and genuinely incorporated into the design and evaluation of programmes, recognising them as active participants rather than passive recipients of care.
- Short-term orphanage volunteering can have unintended negative consequences, particularly in disrupting attachment and emotional stability. Stable, long-term relationships are essential for children's development and cannot be replaced by rotating volunteers.
- Safeguarding must be a central priority, including proper vetting, training, and supervision of all staff and volunteers.

- Ethical practice requires a shift from institution-based care towards family-based, community-led, and sustainable approaches.
- International volunteering can still play a role when it is structured ethically
- Power imbalances and broader structural issues, including historical and cultural influences, must be acknowledged when designing interventions.

Good intentions alone are insufficient; the primary focus must remain on the long-term wellbeing and best interests of the child.

7. Implications for Organisations (NGOs)

During the discussion, participants reflected on a number of practical measures that charities and NGOs should ensure when engaging in programmes involving orphanages or residential care settings. The following considerations were either highlighted by speakers or were thought of as a solution by staff and attendees after listening to the panel.

7.1 Strong Child Protection and Safeguarding Standards

Charities and partner organisations should ensure that robust safeguarding frameworks are in place when working with children. This includes maintaining formal Child Protection Policies and Codes of Conduct that clearly outline expectations for staff, volunteers, and partners.

It was discussed that volunteers involved in programmes with children should undergo appropriate screening procedures, including DBS checks where applicable, and receive safeguarding training prior to any direct contact with children. These measures help ensure that volunteers understand their responsibilities and that risks to children are minimised.

7.2 Community-Centered Approaches

Participants noted that programmes should aim to support the wider community alongside residential care institutions, recognising that the wellbeing of children is closely connected to the wellbeing of their surrounding environment.

Charities and NGOs should therefore consider designing initiatives that benefit both the orphanage and the broader community, such as:

- Supporting local clinics or health initiatives

- Renovating schools, libraries, or learning spaces
- Delivering projects that improve resources available to children and families in surrounding neighbourhoods

These can strengthen community resilience and help address some of the underlying factors that lead to institutional care.

7.3 Responsible and Ethical Media Practices

The discussion also highlighted the importance of responsible media and communication practices when sharing images or stories involving vulnerable children.

Charities and NGOs should ensure that photographs, videos, and personal stories are handled sensitively and only used with appropriate consent. Particular care should be taken to avoid content that could compromise a child's dignity, safety, or privacy. Clear internal guidance for staff and volunteers can help ensure that communications remain ethical and respectful.

7.4 Focus on Practical and Sustainable Support

Participants noted that engagement with orphanages should prioritise practical and sustainable forms of support, rather than short-term or symbolic interventions.

Examples discussed included initiatives that aim to improve the long-term quality of care, such as:

- Renovating and improving facilities
- Supporting education and learning opportunities
- Improving living conditions
- Strengthening the operational sustainability of care institutions

Such support can help ensure that assistance contributes to lasting improvements in children's wellbeing.

7.5 Supporting Family and Community-Based Care

Finally, the discussion highlighted the importance of exploring and supporting alternatives to institutional care, where appropriate and feasible.

Charities and NGOs were encouraged to consider programmes that support children within family and community environments, including initiatives such as:

- Family reunification programmes
- Community-based child support systems
- Foster care or kinship care arrangements
- Education sponsorship programmes that allow children to remain within family settings

8. Potential Recommendations

- If a toolkit is developed following the roundtable discussion, participants noted that it may be valuable for such guidance to extend beyond regulating practice within orphanages. Frameworks could encourage reflection on why institutional care is used and how children enter these systems in the first place.
- Ensure all volunteering programmes are ethically structured, with clear objectives that prioritise child wellbeing over volunteer experience.
- Enhance community-based support initiatives, addressing underlying causes of institutionalisation such as poverty, lack of access to education, and limited healthcare.
- Implement robust monitoring and evaluation systems, focusing on long-term outcomes for children rather than short-term outputs or engagement metrics.
- Promote responsible communication practices, ensuring that images and stories of children are used with informed consent and in a way that protects dignity and privacy.
- Increase investment in local capacity building, including training and supporting local staff, social workers, and caregivers to lead programmes sustainably.
- Incorporate children's voices into decision-making processes, ensuring their perspectives are actively and appropriately considered in matters affecting their care.
- Review organisational funding models and incentives, ensuring that financial structures do not unintentionally encourage the continuation of institutional care.
- Encourage collaboration and knowledge-sharing across organisations, to avoid duplication and build on existing evidence and best practice within the sector.
- Adopt a context-sensitive approach, recognising that interventions must be informed by local cultural, social, and economic conditions.

9. Next Steps

Following the panel discussion, the organisation agreed that the topic of orphanage engagement and volunteer involvement requires continued reflection and responsible decision-making. As such, the following next steps were identified to guide the organisation's approach moving forward.

Continued Dialogue and Review

The organisation will continue to engage in discussions on this topic as the sector evolves. The panel highlighted that perspectives on orphanage volunteerism are continuously developing, and therefore ongoing reflection and openness to new evidence or guidance will remain important. Discussions will continue internally and with sector partners both before and after any formal decisions are finalised, ensuring that policies remain responsive to emerging best practices.

Collaboration with Sector Partners

The organisation will seek to strengthen collaboration with other charities and NGOs that have already developed improved approaches to supporting vulnerable children in residential or community settings. By engaging with experienced partners, the organisation aims to learn from established best practices, share knowledge, and align its programmes with responsible sector standards.

Strengthening Safeguarding and Volunteer Management

The organisation will continue to ensure that strong safeguarding procedures remain in place across all programmes involving children. This includes maintaining clear policies and codes of conduct, as well as ensuring that all volunteers undergo appropriate screening procedures and safeguarding training before participating in activities involving children. These measures aim to ensure that volunteers are appropriately prepared and that children's safety and wellbeing remain the highest priority.

Monitoring and Ongoing Oversight

Regular monitoring will be conducted to assess the wellbeing of children supported through programmes and to review the functioning and management of partner orphanages or residential care settings. These check-ins will help ensure that the environment remains safe, supportive, and aligned with the organisation's safeguarding and ethical standards.

Supporting Family- and Community-Based Alternatives

In line with evolving best practices within the child welfare sector, the organisation will continue to explore and support initiatives that strengthen family- and community-based care. This may include programmes that support foster care, kinship care, family reunification initiatives, and community child-support systems, with the aim of promoting stable and supportive environments for children.

Incorporating Children’s Voices and Wellbeing

A key priority moving forward will be to ensure that the perspectives of children themselves are considered when evaluating programmes. The organisation will explore ways to better assess children’s wellbeing, including their happiness, sense of stability, and overall development. By listening to children’s experiences and preferences where appropriate, the organisation aims to ensure that programmes genuinely contribute to their wellbeing and long-term development.

Executive Summary

Issues

- **Systemic Institutionalisation** – Many children in residential care have living family members; separation is often driven by poverty rather than a lack of caregivers.
- **Attachment and Developmental Risks** – Short-term volunteer cycles disrupt attachment formation and emotional stability, potentially causing long-term psychological harm.
- **Safeguarding and Vetting Gaps** – Risks to children are heightened by inadequate vetting, insufficient supervision, and a lack of formal training for international volunteers.
- **Misaligned Financial Incentives** – Funding models reliant on volunteer fees may unintentionally encourage the continued institutionalisation of children to attract donors.
- **Volunteer-Centric vs. Child-Centred Focus** – Existing models often prioritise the volunteer’s experience over the long-term rights and stability of the child.
- **Power Imbalances and Ethical Communication** – Colonial perspectives can shape care assumptions, while insensitive media practices can compromise a child’s dignity and privacy.

Proposed Interventions

To address these issues, Time to Help (UK) will transition toward a **child-centred, rights-based framework**. Three primary interventions will be applied:

- **Transition to Family-Based Care**
- **Volunteer Role Redesign**
- **Capacity Building and Safeguarding**

Implementation Checklist

Require all volunteers and participants to obtain a DBS check prior to placement.

- Implement mandatory safeguarding and child protection training for all volunteers, staff, and partners before engagement begins.
- Redesign volunteering activities to focus on supervised skill-sharing, education, mentoring, and capacity-building rather than sole or unsupervised visits with children.
- Prohibit one-to-one or isolated interactions between volunteers and children
- Commission an independent academician or researcher to conduct:
 - a needs assessment identifying what children and centres require most, and
 - a separate consultation capturing the wishes, perspectives, and aspirations of the children themselves.
- Re-evaluate the policies, agreements, and safeguarding documentation of all partner centres to ensure compliance with child protection and legal standards (Strict Photography Policies etc)
- Establish regular monitoring visits and welfare checks by trusted local partners to ensure ongoing accountability and safeguarding compliance.
- Reframe programme language and communications by referring to facilities as “children’s centres” or “community care centres” rather than “orphanages,” recognising that many children have living family members.
- Avoid volunteer activities centred on gifting money or short-term donations; instead prioritise sustainable, direct-impact support such as:
 - educational lessons and tutoring,

- school supplies and learning resources,
- vocational and skills training,
- infrastructure improvements and practical building projects.
- Ensure all interventions are guided by a child-centred, rights-based approach focused on long-term wellbeing, dignity, stability, and family reunification where possible.

Materials to Read and Potentially Implement

[Short-term Missions and Volunteering: Safeguarding Orphans and Vulnerable Children](#)

[Orphanage checklist](#)

[Partnership due diligence check](#)

[Due diligence guidelines](#)

[Ethical short term mission, online training and toolkit](#)

[Protecting children in short term mission](#)

[SAFEGUARDING guide for organisations](#)

[Let the child speak for themselves](#)

Materials for Volunteers to Complete

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yF2iMvC1fcl>

Implementation Plan and Action Plan Table

A six-month transition pilot will begin with a comprehensive review of current organisational practices. We will gather continuous feedback from stakeholders (including children), and adjust our policies to ensure long-term sustainability and ethical impact. The table below outlines the strategic transition for Time to Help (UK) including estimated effort and involvement.

Month	Activity	Expected Outcomes	Staff Involvement
1	Comprehensive Programme Audit and Identifying Possible Partnerships	Full mapping of current orphanage partnerships and identification of children with potential for family reunification. Reaching out to NGO's who can support this initiative.	Engagement with local partners and Time to Help leadership.
2	Safeguarding & Guide book for Responsible and Ethical Media Practices	Updating and creating missing Child Protection Policies, training and mandatory DBS/screening.	Coordination with project managers and legal advisors if possible
2	Volunteer Role Redesign and handbook. Child Happiness Assessments	New service descriptions, redefining volunteer boundaries and implementing DBS checks and training. Creating assessments to test Children's wellbeing and opinions.	Partner institution's staff, Project and volunteer managers of TTH.
3	Ethical Media & Communications Training	Launch of new guidelines for respectful storytelling and informed consent. For fundraising as well.	Social media and fundraising teams; field staff collecting stories.
4	Checklist and Handbook for local partners and travelling/field staff	Ensuring the local partners have the same sensitive approach and policies and creating a handbook they can follow.	Partner organisation staff and local TTH staff, field staff

5	Funding Model Realignment and Finalising Partnerships	Strategic shift in financial structures to ensure donations support family-based care rather than just bed-spaces. Connecting with organisations who already have experience and ethical functioning.	Directors, finance teams, and major donor relations.
6	Final Evaluation and Second Panel Discussion	Formal adoption of the "Child-Centred Toolkit" Having a second round of the panel to discuss any changes and TTH development.	All stakeholders

___ End ___