

young refugees

working with unaccompanied asylum-seeking children at ports



Save the Children

what is this guide about?

This guide is designed to assist immigration officers working at ports of entry. It includes:

- practical tips on supporting unaccompanied asylum-seeking children on arrival that can easily be incorporated into your day-to-day work
- answers to frequently asked questions about asylum-seeking young people and why they come to the UK
- information on age assessments and trafficking.

Further reading on the subjects covered in this guide and contact details of organisations working to support unaccompanied asylum-seeking children on arrival can be found on the back page.

introduction

Who are unaccompanied asylum-seeking children?

Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children are people aged under 18 years who arrive in the UK alone or with a person who is not their usual carer to claim asylum.¹ In 2001, 3,469 unaccompanied asylum-seeking children arrived in the UK, 1,647 of whom claimed asylum at ports of entry, mainly in the south-east of England. The majority of young people arriving here are 16 or 17 year olds and male. Recent Home Office statistics show that the young people come from countries where major conflicts are taking place or where serious human rights abuses occur, including Afghanistan, Somalia and Iraq.²

Arriving in England

Unaccompanied children seeking asylum will often be feeling tired after a long journey, scared of being alone – maybe for the first time in their lives – confused by the unfamiliar environment and unsure about what is going to happen next. As one of the first people they meet, an immigration officer has an important role to play in ensuring young people are made to feel safe and supported. This guide offers a few basic principles you can follow as an immigration officer and some practical tips. These will help alleviate the anxieties of young people, enabling them to respond to questions they are asked. It will also help you collect the information you require.

Save the Children consulted unaccompanied asylum-seeking children about the worries and problems they have on arrival.³ The main problems they experience are:

- delays at ports – as a result of which young people sometimes have to sleep on the concourse overnight alone
- personal details, including name and date of birth, being incorrectly recorded, causing difficulties in accessing services and in their asylum claim
- people not believing what they are saying
- feeling confused about what is happening to them.

This guide provides advice on how to alleviate some of these problems and should also make your job easier.

Q&A

Question: Why would people come here illegally if they had genuine reasons to seek asylum?

Answer: Unless asylum-seekers arrive on an organised relief programme there are very few legal ways of seeking asylum. As a result the majority of people have no alternative but to use illegal means of getting here. This does not mean they do not have a genuine reason for fleeing their country of origin and seeking asylum. Many people, including unaccompanied children, are forced into the hands of 'agents' to help them reach safety in the UK.

There is a strong correlation between countries involved in conflicts or where serious human rights abuses are occurring and where asylum-seekers are coming from. The Refugee Council estimates that over 50% of people seeking asylum in 2001 were given some form of leave to remain by the Home Office.⁴

Question: How can these young people be genuine refugees when they say they are coming to the UK to get a better education?

Answer: Parents or carers sometimes tell their children that they are being sent away to get a better education or to visit a family member. This is often to allay their children's fears and protect them from the real, often very disturbing, reasons why they are being sent away. Parents/carers may also do this to prevent them worrying about what is happening to those who are left behind.

Question: A lot of young people don't tell the truth to immigration officers about how they have got here, where they are from, etc. Why would they do this if they had genuine reasons to seek asylum?

Answer: Young people who have just arrived are often tired, scared and confused. They may have been told by an 'agent' what to say and do when they arrive. For example, they may be told to hide in a toilet for a few hours before presenting themselves to immigration (this makes it difficult to track which flight a young person has been on, ensuring the agent's route is not exposed). The agent may threaten the young person, or their family back home, if they divulge their flight details or other information.

In addition, young people may have been told what to say by family members. They may also feel scared of people in uniform and positions of authority and not know whether or not to trust them.

There are therefore a number of reasons why young people may not tell the truth or may give confused information. It is important to remember that they are vulnerable children who are victims of war and abuse, not criminals.

Question: Most of the young people coming here are 16 or 17 and have managed to make their own way here alone, so why do they need to be treated differently to adults?

Answer: The Children Act 1989 and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) define a child as anyone under the age of 18.

Unaccompanied asylum-seeking 16 and 17 year olds often have no choice but to come alone. They may come across as being self-reliant and not in need of support. However, they are often extremely vulnerable and in need of reassurance, care and support.

10 top tips

1 Be friendly

Children may be frightened when they arrive at immigration and unsure of what is going to happen to them. Some young people, particularly older teenagers, may not openly show that they are scared or upset. To allay their fears use friendly body language – smile, make eye contact, position yourself at their level rather than standing over them. Be as informal as possible – take off your jacket, roll up your sleeves.

2 Meet basic needs

Remember that children will often wait to be asked if they need something. If they are feeling shy or scared they are even less likely to let you know what they need. Regularly ask the young person if they would like a drink, something to eat, whether they are warm enough, if they need to go to the toilet, etc. Remember that they may not be familiar with words such as sandwich or wc, so use simple and descriptive language. They are likely to feel more ready to answer your questions once these basic needs have been met.

3 Create a safe place to wait and rest

Find a comfortable area where the young person can rest while they wait for a social worker to pick them up. Make the area welcoming by putting pictures and posters on the wall. Provide things for younger children to play with. Immigration officers are often in the difficult position of finding somewhere for young people to sleep and regulations and lack of facilities have often meant young people are left on the concourse overnight. This should be avoided as it may place these vulnerable young people at risk. Timely referrals to social services help avoid the need for young people to sleep at ports overnight (see point 6).



4 Use interpreters

Don't leave it up to the young person to say that they want an interpreter – they may say they don't need an interpreter because they don't want to be demanding or do not understand the importance of the accuracy of the information collected at this stage. If you have any doubts about their level of English and their ability to understand everything you will be discussing then involve an interpreter. Always ask if the young person understands the interpreter and feels comfortable with them. This will improve the accuracy of information collected.

Some young people may say they don't want an interpreter because they are wary of coming into contact with people from their own country. For example, they may be worried that the interpreter is an informer, or comes from an ethnic or political group that they or their family are in conflict with. Keep this in mind when selecting and using an interpreter. Reassure the young person of the interpreter's professionalism and neutrality.

5 Give information

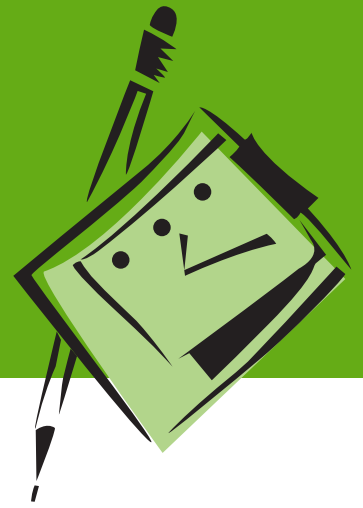
Keep the young person informed of what is happening to them to help allay any fears they may have. Remember, this country and their situation will feel strange and unfamiliar to them. Be clear about who you are and what your role is. Explain what is happening to them, why this is so and what is likely to happen next. Explain why you need to know the personal information you are asking them.

6 Refer to the appropriate authorities

Social services: Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (under 18 years old) are the responsibility of social services and should be referred to the relevant social services team as soon as possible after arrival. It is important to make this referral quickly so that social services have time to make arrangements to pick the young person up and to avoid young people having to wait for a long time at immigration. When making the referral, share all the information you

PS

practical tips on working with unaccompanied asylum-seeking children on arrival



have about the young person with social services. This will limit the number of times the young person has to repeat what is often upsetting information. It will also help social services plan their response in advance of arrival.

Panel of Advisers: All unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (including those whose age is being disputed) should also be referred by an immigration officer to the Panel of Advisers at the Refugee Council within 24 hours of their arrival (see back page for information on the service provided by the Refugee Council). The Refugee Council try to contact young people who are referred to them. They rely on the accuracy and detail of information given to them by immigration officers to do this.

7 Identify unaccompanied children

You have an important role to play in identifying whether a child is unaccompanied and requires the support of social services or is with their parent or usual carer. Some unaccompanied children may attach themselves to another family on arrival and go unnoticed. In other cases children may come with older brothers or sisters who are not able to care for their younger sibling(s). If you have suspicions about a child's relationship to a family group, check whether the purported parent(s) or carer(s) appear familiar to the child. Is the child treated the same as other children in the family? If they are with older siblings ask them if they are usually responsible for looking after their younger brother(s) and/or sister(s). Explain that they may be able to get support from social services. If you have any doubts about a person's relationship to a child or ability to take on the role of carer, refer to social services and let them make the decision.

8 Check sponsors

Keep in mind that traffickers sometimes disguise themselves as sponsors.⁵ Immigration officers have a key role to play in ensuring young people are picked up by responsible adults who they know. You should involve social services – and, in cases of trafficking, the police – in any case where there is

concern about the child's safety or relationship to the adult(s) sponsoring them. Check if the child or young person is happy to go with the 'sponsor' – do this in private, as the young person is likely to be scared to say no in front of the sponsor, and take as much time as you can to do this. Explain to the young person that they can get help and support from social services. (See next page for information on trafficking).

9 Build networks

You may have to deal with complicated cases when an unaccompanied asylum-seeking child arrives. It is useful to know what organisations can help. Build up a network of people who can help, including statutory and voluntary agencies. For example, the Young Person's Adviser at Refugee Arrivals Project (see overleaf). At Heathrow airport a quarterly liaison meeting involving social services, immigration, police and voluntary agencies has been established. The meeting has been successful in resolving inter-agency problems. For example, immigration officers are quicker to make referrals to social services and, in turn, social workers are arriving at the airport quicker. If you work at Heathrow airport let immigration officers who attend the meeting know of any problems you are having, which may help get them resolved. If you work at other ports, find out if there is a similar meeting and, if not, set one up.

10 Specialist immigration officers and checklists

Some ports have specialist immigration officers who have experience of working with unaccompanied asylum-seeking children. Check if there are specialist immigration officers where you work and when possible refer cases or get advice from them. Some airport terminals have checklists to remind immigration officers of the procedures to carry out when an unaccompanied child arrives. Check if your port has one. If not, establish one. Contact other ports to find out their procedures.

age assessments

The age of a young person will affect the level and type of support they receive and determines whether it should be from social services or the National Asylum Support Service (NASS).

Assessing a person's age is often made difficult because young people arrive without identification documents. The Home Office has guidelines on handling cases where a person's age is in dispute. The following five key points will also help you make the right decisions when you are assessing the age of a young person.

If in any doubt refer to social services. Then childcare professionals can undertake an assessment of age. Age assessment is a process, not a single event. Only through direct work with a child over time and an holistic assessment of their experience, skills and needs can a judgement be made on which age band a child or young person is likely to fit into. It is recognised that age determination is an inexact science.

Even when based on medical evidence, it is impossible to identify a child's exact age and the margin of error can be five years either way.⁶

Life experience takes its toll. Young people may look and act older than they are because of their experience in their country of origin. For example, they may have worked and taken on 'adult' responsibilities from an early age. Also, the experience and trauma of war may affect the way a young person looks and acts.

Young people with facial hair. Teenage boys with beards often look older than they are. Boys in some parts of the world, notably the Indian sub-continent, grow facial hair earlier than most boys in Europe.⁷ It is a cultural norm in some countries to grow a beard as soon as it is physically possible. For example, in some parts of Afghanistan it is common to grow a beard at the age of 13 or 14.

Birth dates are not important in some countries. A young person may not know their date of birth and be vague about when they were born. This does not mean they are trying to hide their age. In 2001, UNHCR estimated that there were about 40 million unregistered births around the world.⁸ In some places date of birth is not important and birthdays are not celebrated. In some places calendars are not used and the passing of time is measured by seasons rather than calendar dates.

Different calendars are used in some countries. There is often confusion over age because of different calendars used around the world. For example, the Ethiopian calendar is currently eight years and seven days behind our calendar (this changes regularly as there are 13 months in the Ethiopian calendar).⁹ Converting from one calendar to the other can be difficult. Mistakes are made and young people or their interpreters may often give the wrong date of birth.

trafficking

Children are being trafficked to the UK to work in the sex trade, in sweatshops and restaurants. There is also evidence to show that the UK may be a stop-off point to other European countries.¹⁰

Immigration officers have a key role to play in anti-trafficking activities. Young people are being trafficked from countries in West Africa and Eastern Europe, and from South Africa, China and Vietnam.¹¹ Some of these young people are told by traffickers to claim asylum as unaccompanied children. Others may come in

claiming to be adults seeking asylum, or come under false passports, or with student or tourist visas. Some young people may arrive accompanied by an adult who is the trafficker. They are all extremely vulnerable and it is the responsibility of professionals who come into contact with them to provide support and protection.

A profile of people at risk of being trafficked has been put together at some ports, including Gatwick and Heathrow airports. Protocols for dealing with trafficked people have also been

established at some ports. This is to help professionals working at ports to identify people who are potentially being trafficked and provide guidance on what procedures to follow when this happens. Check if your port has a profile and protocol. If you identify any person who fits the profile refer them to the appropriate authorities, as detailed in the protocol. Referrals should usually be made to social services, the police, or a specialist branch, such as the Human Smuggling Unit at Heathrow airport. If in any doubt make the referral.

young person's adviser

Refugee Arrivals Project

In 2001, Refugee Arrivals Project at Heathrow airport, in partnership with Save the Children, appointed a Young Person's Adviser to support unaccompanied asylum-seeking children. It is the first position of its kind in the UK.

The Adviser offers the following support:

- direct support to particularly vulnerable unaccompanied asylum-seeking children who arrive at Heathrow airport
- training to immigration officers, social services and voluntary staff on how to provide appropriate support to unaccompanied asylum-seeking children on arrival
- advice and support to immigration officers at Heathrow and social workers at Hillingdon to ensure appropriate referrals are made and that the young people receive the right type of support
- telephone advice to professionals working with children at other ports of entry in the UK.

Young Person's Adviser at work

A young girl, aged 11 years old, arrived at Heathrow airport from a West African country with a woman claiming to be her mother. The Adviser was informed by immigration officers of their arrival, who were suspicious of their relationship. The Adviser talked with the girl alone about her worries and managed to reassure her about what was happening. The girl provided information to the Adviser which alerted them to the need to refer the girl to social services. Immigration then referred to social services and the young girl was collected by a social worker and taken into care.

In the first six months the project provided support to 87 unaccompanied asylum-seeking children, from the age of six upwards, either directly or through providing advice to social workers and immigration officers on particular cases. The direct support often entails talking through the reception process with the young people and allaying any worries or concerns they may have. The Adviser also provides support in age dispute cases, ensuring the young person understands what is happening and that a fair assessment is carried out.

"The Young Person's Adviser has been an invaluable benefit to immigration officers... The legislative and bureaucratic procedures are complicated and the access to an adviser allows immigration officers to know that they are taking all relevant issues into consideration."

Chief Immigration Officer, Heathrow

help

If you would like to know more about the project and how to access support call the Young Person Adviser on: 020 8759 5740.

If you would like advice on how to establish a similar project at other ports of entry contact Elli Free, Save the Children on: 020 8741 4054 x124



key contacts & further reading

refugee arrivals project

James Davies, Young Person's Adviser
(see previous page for details of post)

Telephone: 020 8759 5740

Fax: 020 8759 7058

Email: james.davies@refugee-arrivals.org.uk

Elizabeth Little, Chief Executive

Chair of Inter Agency Liaison Heathrow Meeting
Participant in Anti-Trafficking Working Groups

Telephone: 020 8607 6888

Fax: 020 8607 6851

Email: elizabeth.little@refugee-arrivals.org.uk

refugee council

Children's Panel of Advisers for Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children

The Home Office fund the Panel to provide independent guidance and support to ensure that the child is aware of his/her rights and the services to which he/she is entitled.

Duty Telephone Line: 020 7582 4947.

Fax: 020 7840 4388

Judith Dennis, Policy Adviser, Unaccompanied Children

Able to give advice on current policy and practice regarding unaccompanied asylum-seeking children.

Telephone: 020 7820 3101

Email: judith.dennis@refugeecouncil.org.uk

ECPAT

End Child Prostitution, Pornography, Trafficking Carron Somerset, Campaigns Officer

Has up to date information on trafficking of minors in the UK.

Telephone: 020 7501 8927

Email: ecpatuk@antislavery.org

anti-trafficking contacts at ports

PC Alan McDonald, Intelligence Officer or PC Kath Clark

Human Smuggling Unit, Metropolitan Police Service, Heathrow

Tel: 020 8897 4181

Paula Movel, Immigration Officer, Gatwick Intelligence Unit,

Tel: 01293 504 752

further reading

Cold Comfort: Young separated refugees in England, Kate Stanley, Save the Children, 2001.

Research with young separated refugees in England and professionals working with them. Includes a chapter on arrival and age determination. £7.50. To order a copy contact Plymbridge Distributors, tel: 01752 202 301 or email: orders@plymbridge.com

Separated Children Coming to Western Europe, Wendy Ayotte, Save the Children, 2000.

Explores the issues that lead children to flee from their home country and looks at the often perilous journeys these children make and the situation they face on arrival in Western Europe. £9.95. To order a copy contact Plymbridge Distributors, tel: 01752 202 301 or email: orders@plymbridge.com

Separated Children in Europe Programme, Statement of Good Practice, UNHCR/Save the Children, 2000.

Provides a straightforward account of the policies and practices required to implement and protect the rights of separated children in Europe from the point of arrival. Free. To order a copy contact Patricia Coelho, Save the Children, tel: 020 7703 5400. Copies are also available at www.sce.gla.ac.uk

Refugee Resources in the UK, Refugee Council, 2002. A directory of statutory and voluntary agencies working with refugees and asylum-seekers across the UK. Available in CD-rom. For more information call Refugee Council information line on 020 7820 3085 or log on at www.refugeecouncil.org.uk

What the Professionals Know: The trafficking of children into and through the UK for sexual purposes, Carron Somerset, End Child Prostitution, Pornography, Trafficking, 2001.

Background information on child trafficking and an analysis of what police, immigration and non-governmental organisations know about the trafficking of children into the UK. Free. To order a copy call Carron Somerset on 020 7501 8927.

Human Traffic, Anti-slavery, 2002. Campaign video on trafficking containing footage from Ghana, Nigeria, Italy and England, with interviews from those trafficked, activists, social workers and the police (11 mins). £6. To obtain a copy email: b.smaga@antislavery.org

notes

¹ This is the EU definition. When the Home Office refers to unaccompanied minors they are usually referring only to those children who arrive alone.

² Home Office, Research and Statistics Dept, verbal communication, July 2002.

³ Save the Children *Cold Comfort: Young separated refugees in England, 2001* and Save the Children, *Evaluation Report – Reception support to unaccompanied minors project 2002*, not published.

⁴ This figure includes those that were granted protection after appeals. See Refugee Council website, www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/news/myths

⁵ Trafficking is the transportation of people (within or outside of their country) for the purpose of exploitation, such as prostitution and forced labour, using force, threats or other forms of coercion. This is different to smuggling where an agent or 'people smuggler' solely facilitates the transporting of people across borders for profit.

⁶ Kings Fund, *The Health of Refugee Children, Guidelines for Paediatricians*, Nov 1999

⁷ Ibid

⁸ UNHCR *Refugees magazine*, Vol 1, 2001

⁹ As of 16th July 2002

¹⁰ ECPAT *What the Professionals Know*, Nov 2001

¹¹ Ibid

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