



SUMMARY

“A REFUGEE AND THEN...”

Participatory Assessment of the Reception and Early Integration of unaccompanied Refugee Children in the UK



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

“A refugee is not what you are, it’s a part of you. I am [also] a student. I’m doing this and that; the word ‘refugee’ is not the end – it’s ‘a refugee, and then -’. And that’s helpful for me to think.”

Refugee 19 years (female)

Recent years have seen an increase in the numbers of unaccompanied and separated refugee children living in the UK. At the same time there have been significant changes in the UK policy environment, with the introduction of new schemes facilitating the transfer and resettlement of children, both to and within the UK, alongside the issuance of new government strategies and statutory guidance.

While there is expansive literature examining the immigration law and policy framework for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children in the

UK, less research has explored their reception arrangements and early integration support from the perspectives of local authorities, service providers and, mostly importantly, the children themselves.

This research brings together first-hand accounts of young refugees and asylum-seekers and those who support them across the UK, as they describe the path from their arrival to early integration in British society.

The research was funded by the European Commission’s Directorate-General for Justice and Consumers and was undertaken by UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency, with support from Unicef UK and the International Organization for Migration.

Research objectives and methodology

The objectives of this research were to:

- Understand the early experiences of children and young people who have arrived unaccompanied in the UK as refugees and asylum-seekers through various avenues, to hear their views on what a pathway to successful integration in the UK would look like and listen to their proposed solutions to the challenges they face;
- Understand these same issues from the perspective of local authorities and service providers working with unaccompanied children; and
- Identify positive UK practices in reception and early integration support for unaccompanied children and areas for improvement.

The report is based on a participatory assessment conducted by UNHCR from June 2018 – January 2019 which included in-depth interviews and focus-group discussions with 65 unaccompanied children and young people living in 11 local authorities in England and Scotland. The assessment also included interviews with 47 stakeholders supporting young people in England, Scotland and Wales, and site visits to children’s and young people’s places of residence.

Key findings:

Initial treatment and early reception

Despite initially feeling afraid, a majority of young people found that the UK authorities, including police and social services, had treated them in a kind and humane manner upon arrival. These experiences left a lasting impression on children, strengthening their feelings of safety, trust and sense of being settled, happy and integrated in the UK. This was not the case for all children, however. Those who had their age disputed typically reported receiving harsher treatment, which was considered highly disruptive to their reception and early integration experience.

“ The police approached [me with a] smiling face. They show me respect, and they told me they were there to help me. The way that they approached me - I felt like I was safe. I never experienced police being so nice. [...] The social worker came to help me. And that’s it – now my life is better... You know, when I came here it was excellent. They looked after me properly, better than any place I’ve ever been.”

Asylum-seeker, 17 years (male)

“ The problem was the Home Office because they didn’t accept my age... That four months was too hard. I was on my own I had nowhere to go, I didn’t know nothing. I didn’t speak English. I had nobody. I had a lawyer but it was too hard to make an appointment, and it wasn’t easy to understand what they were explaining to me.”

Focus group discussion, refugees (mixed gender)

Section 67 of the Immigration Act 2016 – the so-called “Dubs scheme” - and the Vulnerable Children’s Resettlement Scheme (VCRS) were viewed positively by local authorities as they allowed for the organised transfer of asylum-seeking and refugee children to the UK. Stakeholders felt the schemes gave them time to plan and make arrangements for arrivals, in contrast to the National Transfer Scheme (NTS) which provides for children who spontaneously arrive. The NTS was seen as more disorganised and in some cases disruptive to the early integration of children.

While the NTS may be unsustainable in its current form, there was agreement amongst stakeholders with its objective - to ensure a more even distribution of unaccompanied children amongst local authorities. Given that numbers of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children arriving spontaneously to the UK have remained relatively steady in recent years, it should be feasible for central and local government to plan in a more predictable manner for future arrivals.

Significant challenges were identified with the reception and accommodation of children reunited with family under the Dublin III Regulation and “Dublin-like procedure”, used for some of those transferred in connection with the 2016 Calais camp clearance. Local authority support for families receiving children under these procedures is limited and discretionary, and many families are unprepared for the realities of caring for a teenager with an often high level of need.

Care and accommodation

Research findings clearly point to the integration benefits of placing a child in foster care. Despite this, it was observed that foster placements were not always available or prioritised for unaccompanied children, especially those over 16 years. The majority of children interviewed in the research were instead placed in multi-occupancy supported accommodation, which appeared to have the worst outcomes for children's integration prospects in the study.

"I was 15, I should have been with my family, but I didn't have that chance... Sometimes we would come home and there was no electricity. No light. We couldn't charge our phone. Couldn't eat. I was so stressed and tired seriously. At that time I was really, really crying. Sometimes I went to college and I didn't even take a shower because of the electricity. I was living there like 6-7 months but it felt like 10 years. It was a disaster, they were smoking weed...One of the guys used to cut himself." – Refugee discussing his experience in multi-occupancy accommodation, 18 years (male).

Education and English language learning

When asked about their education, most young people described a diverse, multicultural and tolerant picture of British education institutions. However, many unaccompanied children faced delays and disruption in access to education - especially age-disputed children, children transferred through Dublin III/ Dublin-like procedures, and children transferred through the NTS. Few children included in the assessment were engaged in full-time, mainstream education. Many only received English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) lessons without the opportunity to take a wider range of classes and subjects. The minority of children attending (or who had previously attended) a mainstream school environment in the UK were found to have more developed English language skills, and demonstrated higher levels of integration than those enrolled in further education colleges.

Health, wellbeing and support

While the physical health needs of unaccompanied children appeared to be well provided for, the research identified gaps in the area of mental health support. There appeared to be a lack of specialist support for unaccompanied asylum-seeking and refugee children, and social workers and other practitioners risked failing to recognise unaccompanied children's specific mental health needs. Furthermore young people appeared to lack a clear understanding of mental health issues and of available services, or have stigmatized perceptions of them. Meanwhile poor mental health remains a significant impediment to progress in integration, including children's ability to remain and thrive in education, to access employment opportunities, and to engage in active citizenship and social participation more broadly.

Safeguarding

The majority of young people interviewed in the assessment reported feeling safe and secure since arriving in the UK, however, safeguarding concerns were raised. Frontline workers pointed to the high rate at which unaccompanied children went missing from their care placements (especially previously trafficked children). This phenomenon may be linked to a range of factors, from delays in decision-making for asylum and trafficking claims and children being in limbo as a result, to re-trafficking.

Social inclusion and participation

Despite building social networks, few young people included in the study reported having any British friends, tending to socialise only with those from their own communities. Furthermore, while there appeared to be a strong emphasis placed on supporting unaccompanied children to maintain their community, cultural and ethnic ties, less work was being done to support children to access broader or more mainstream social spaces.

Cross-cutting issues

The dissolution of specialist teams within local authorities comprised of social workers with specific knowledge and expertise in providing support to unaccompanied children, was identified as a cross-cutting challenge affecting multiple domains of integration, including education, care and accommodation and access to mental health support.

The lack of contact with family members abroad and the inability to reunite in the UK were identified as major barriers to integration for the unaccompanied children interviewed. These factors appeared to have a significant negative impact on their emotional wellbeing and ability to adjust to their new surroundings.

“Life is hard without your family. It's not easy – waking up in the morning time, and nobody is there. If you have your mum or brother or sister next to you then life is going to be easier.”

Asylum-seeker, 18 years (male)

Negative experiences in the immigration system and lengthy and protracted procedures were also found to have a profoundly negative impact on all aspects of children's integration. Uncertainty about the future typically emerged as the dominant source of stress and anxiety in unaccompanied children's lives, impacting negatively on their emotional wellbeing, undermining their capacity for overcoming past trauma and moving on with their lives, and preventing them from feeling a part of British society.

“[Before I got my status] I wouldn't go out with my friends. They would call me to go out. I'd just lay in bed all day. They tried to make me to play cricket, but I wouldn't. I didn't even go to college. At night time I couldn't sleep...It made me so worried and stressed. The biggest issue is the asylum process. They shouldn't take that long...”

Refugee, 19 years (male)

Where guardianship services were available, the assessment showed that they played an important role in supporting children. These services helped children address many of the challenges identified, including to navigate complex administrative and legal processes, understand their rights and entitlements,

and access a range of services (e.g. education and health services) vital for integration.

“[The] guardianship service was always there. She [guardian] came to all my interviews and was there for more than just paperwork. I had a big issue with interpreters and it was hard for me. I used to just nod, even when I didn't understand a lot of the things a person was telling me, and the guardian would take notes. At the end of the interview we would grab a coffee. She would never leave me on my own after an interview with all that in my head...”

Refugee, 19 years (male)

Throughout the research, stakeholders consistently raised concerns about the funding level that is made available for local authorities supporting unaccompanied children, arguing that it is inadequate to meet the needs of the group. During the research for this report the Home Office announced an increase to local authority funding for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children in response to its review into the matter. Whilst the increase is welcome recognition of the costs associated with supporting unaccompanied asylum-seeking and refugee children, it is imperative that funding levels are consistently reviewed to ensure that they are commensurate with children's needs.

Key Recommendations for UK authorities:

Based on the above findings, this report outlines a number of recommendations for UK Government departments and authorities to improve children's reception and early integration experience.

Recommendations include the need to:

Ensure consistency of treatment and support

- Ensure consistency of support for all unaccompanied children to fully realise their rights regardless of their means of arrival in the UK. This would, in particular, include improving reception standards for unaccompanied children arriving spontaneously. More specific recommendations on how this can be achieved follow below (**Department for Education and Home Office**).

Improve training for first line responders

- Provide improved training and develop standard procedures on how to approach and identify unaccompanied and separated children and child protection for all likely first points of contact, including border authorities, police, and health care providers (**Department for Education and Home Office**).

Review problematic age assessment procedures

- Record and publish data on those claiming to be children and considered by immigration officials to be over 25 years old (and those previously categorised as “significantly over” 18 years old under the previous Home Office asylum policy guidance).
- Revise Home Office asylum policy guidance on assessing age, to withdraw the power given to immigration officials to make an initial age assessment if physical appearance and demeanour “very strongly suggests they are 25 years of age or over” and instead ensure that:
 - age assessments are only carried out as a measure of last resort i.e. where there are serious doubts as to the individual’s age and where other approaches have failed to establish that person’s age;
 - all age disputed individuals are given an age assessment; and
 - prior to the age assessment, all age-disputed individuals are given the benefit of the doubt and treated as a child unless this would be clearly unreasonable.
- When an age assessment is conducted, a process must be developed that allows for a holistic, impartial multi-agency approach, conducted over an adequate period of time, drawing on the expertise of those who play a role in the child’s life, including health professionals, psychologists, teachers, foster parents, youth workers, advocates, guardians and social workers (**Department for Education and Home Office**).

Ensure that revisions to the National Transfer Scheme (NTS) ensure efficiency and alignment with the ‘best interests’ principle

- The Home Office’s continuing NTS review and revision process should focus on the introduction of:
 - Provisions to facilitate more efficient transfers of children with strict timelines on transfers, to prevent children from unnecessarily being relocated once settled in a placement;
 - Clearer guidance for local authorities on best interests assessments prior to transfer to ensure that transfers are carried in accordance with the best interests principle, which involves consultation with the child and caregivers; and
 - Strengthened collaboration, partnership and information sharing among local authorities, to ensure appropriate matching of children under the NTS and consistency in decision-making and entitlements (**Department for Education and Home Office**).

Commission research on the situation of children transferred under Dublin III/Dublin-like procedures

- Commission external research into the situation of children transferred into families through Dublin III/Dublin-like procedures, to better understand their reception and integration challenges (**Department for Education and Home Office**).

Prioritize foster care where appropriate

- To the extent possible, prioritise foster care for all unaccompanied children unless it is clearly in the child’s best interests to place them elsewhere (**Department for Education**).

Establish specialist capacity at the local authority level

- Build/re-establish specialist capacity and training for social workers at local authority level in undertaking assessment of needs, and care planning for unaccompanied asylum-seeking and refugee children (**Department for Education**).

Consider the specific orientation and educational needs of young asylum-seekers and refugees

- Develop and fund reception and orientation programmes for all children who arrive in the UK so that children are quickly enrolled in a structured programme to introduce them to life in the UK, learn basic English, and get used to a UK educational setting (**Department for Education**).
- Review the admission process to be followed when deciding whether or not an unaccompanied asylum-seeking child is to be admitted in-year or in the main admissions round for the school year (**Department for Education**).

Support children to access mainstream education, sport, culture and leisure

- Develop and fund initiatives that support unaccompanied children to access a range of (mainstream) educational, sports, cultural and leisure activities with other children of a similar age (**Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, Department for Education, Home Office and Local Authorities**).

Provide creative, evidenced-based and practical interventions for addressing mental health

- Provide creative, evidenced-based and practical interventions for addressing mental health issues affecting unaccompanied children (**Department for Education and Department of Health and Social Care**).
- Develop interventions to tackle stigma associated with mental health problems and to “normalise” the experiences of many unaccompanied children, including through youth groups, educational programmes, and one-to-one therapeutic support (**Department for Education and Department of Health and Social Care**).

Continue National Referral Mechanism (NRM) reforms

- Finalise the child-friendly NRM reform and roll out the Independent Child Trafficking Advocates (ICTA) system so that the new measures for better identification, rehabilitation, and protection of children are in operation (**Home Office**).

Introduce independent guardianship in England and Wales

- Introduce independent guardians (for all unaccompanied and separated children), who must work to promote their best interests and have sufficient legal authority, including to hold relevant agencies to account and instruct solicitors on behalf of a child (**Department for Education and Home Office**).

Review restrictions on refugee children sponsoring their family members

- Amend the Immigration Rules to allow unaccompanied refugee children to sponsor their parents/guardians to join them in the UK (**Home Office**).
- Reintroduce legal aid eligibility for beneficiaries of international protection making applications for family reunion (**Ministry of Justice**).

Strengthen the quality and efficiency of the asylum system for unaccompanied children

- Strengthen the quality and efficiency of asylum decision-making for claims made by unaccompanied children and young people in recognition of their specific needs and the impact that the asylum system can have on their integration experience. Asylum claims of unaccompanied children should be processed efficiently within a set time frame (e.g. six months) allowing for an extension only in exceptional cases. (**Home Office**).



This publication has been produced with the assistance of the European Union. The Contents of this publication are the sole responsibility of UNHCR and can be in no way taken to reflect the views of the European Union.



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS:

This report was researched and written by Elizabeth Yarrow, an independent consultant for UNHCR with funding from the European Commission's Directorate-General for Justice and Consumers (DG JUST). The study benefitted from the expert input of Unicef UK and the UN Migration Agency, IOM, both members of the advisory group for the report.

Our deepest thanks goes to the young refugees and asylum-seekers who took part in the participatory assessment, for generously giving their time and sharing their experiences, which were often very difficult to recount.

UNHCR would like to thank the social workers, youth workers, service managers, local authorities, regional strategic migration partnerships, NGOs and others whom we interviewed for the assessment and provided invaluable insights. We are also grateful for the support provided in organising interviews and focus group discussions with young people.

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