



This is a good place to live and think about the future...

The needs and experiences of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children in Scotland

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This research was funded by Scottish Refugee Council, with the support of The Diana, Princess of Wales Memorial Fund, and was conducted by the Glasgow Centre for the Child and Society during 2005.

The aim of the research was to explore the experiences and needs of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children in Scotland, and to assess how well current services were responding to the needs of these young people.

31 unaccompanied asylum-seeking children and 74 service providers were interviewed as part of the research.

Main findings

Children's experiences

- Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children often experienced traumatic events in their countries of origin and many were brought to Scotland by an agent.
- The main reasons for seeking asylum included issues connected with war, political circumstances, and either the death or persecution of family members or the persecution of the child themselves.
- Many of the children had little knowledge of their journey to Scotland and around half did not know that Scotland was their final destination.
- None of the children interviewed divulged whether they were trafficked to Scotland.
- The largest group of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children in Scotland came from Africa; predominantly East Africa.
- Most of the children felt safe upon arrival in Scotland and were enjoying their new lives. However, they faced many problems including; unsuitable accommodation, isolation, unfamiliarity with the English language, racism and the cold climate.
- The experiences of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children upon arrival in Scotland were largely dependent upon particular place of arrival and the availability of the required services at that particular time.
- Service providers acknowledged the stress and anxiety that many children had to endure upon arrival in Scotland, as well as the emotional and psychological implications of being detached and dislocated from their families, friends and communities in their countries of origin.

Children's needs

- Understandably, unaccompanied asylum-seeking children possessed a wide range of needs including: appropriate accommodation, education, legal advice and health care.
- Service providers stated that the paramount need of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children was for them to be recognised as children.
- The lack of understanding and knowledge about the asylum system, and a lack of explanation about how the system works, was a stressful and frustrating experience for many of the children.
- The provision of accommodation for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children in Scotland was seen as very poor. Some children are housed in accommodation for homeless people, and find such places disruptive, abusive and dangerous. Others stay in bed and breakfast accommodation for considerable lengths of time.
- Knowledge of services available to unaccompanied asylum-seeking children was variable and confused.
- Service providers stressed that the most important health need of unaccompanied-asylum seeking children is the need to ensure that they have been immunised against the same diseases as other children in Scotland.
- One of the main challenges experienced by the children is coping with the stress, anxiety and trauma frequently associated with their pre-flight experiences.
- Service providers were concerned about the children's feelings of belonging, identity and social and emotional well-being. A small number suggested that the children needed support to cope with incidents of xenophobia and racism.

Service provision

- There were mixed views about overall service provision (legal, education, social service, interpreting & health), with most services usually receiving a combination of positive and negative feedback.
- Services vary dramatically across Scotland. Locations outside Glasgow tend to have less contact and less experience with unaccompanied asylum-seeking children and thus have fewer services on offer and poorer practitioners' knowledge. However, many practitioners also noted that experience does not necessarily equate with expertise and that there needs to be a general overall investment in working with unaccompanied asylum seeking-children in Scotland.
- Service providers were generally positive about their work with unaccompanied asylum-seeking children, in particular because of the children's resilience and determination to succeed. However, there was evidence of racism amongst some staff working with unaccompanied asylum-seeking children.
- Education services were received the most positively. A number of the interviewees were passionately committed to learning. However there was frustration at the barriers to accessing further and higher education. In particular, concern was raised over unaccompanied asylum-seeking children's ineligibility to receive Education Maintenance Allowances (EMA).

- A significant number of statutory service providers were unaware of existing advice regarding age assessment of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children.
- Many service providers were concerned about the difference in service provision available to unaccompanied asylum-seeking children who are 16 and 17 compared to their younger counterparts.
- There is a significant gap in services for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children when they reach the age of 18.
- Service providers raised concern over the difficulty of determining the rights of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children in Scotland making it difficult for them to advocate on the children's behalf. This is due to the unclear boundaries associated with separate Scottish and UK legislation and policy.

Recommendations

The interface between UK and Scottish legislation and policy

- The Home Office and the UK Government must take more account of the particularities of the Scottish context in developing policy which affects unaccompanied asylum-seeking children in Scotland.
- Clearer guidance is needed with regards to the remits and responsibilities of the Scottish and UK Parliaments. Service providers must be aware of the legislation, policies and procedures that apply to their work with unaccompanied asylum-seeking children in Scotland taking account of children's legislation and devolution.

Youth transition

- Further youth work, advocacy and social activities for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children should be developed.
- The statutory duty of local authorities in Scotland to provide for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children over 16 years old as "looked after" children needs to be clarified.
- Additional statutory and voluntary services should be made available to unaccompanied asylum-seeking children between the ages of 16-18, in order to offer social opportunities, personal support and confidence building.
- Services for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children who are 18 or over must be developed by statutory and voluntary organisations, as many young people at this stage still require additional support.

Age assessment

- Information, guidance and best practice regarding age assessment must be followed by all statutory service providers working with unaccompanied asylum-seeking children. Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children should also be informed of such issues.

Legal and guardianship assistance

- Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children in Scotland should be given assistance from an independent guardian or advisor. This should be similar to the Panel of Advisors operated by the Refugee Council which unaccompanied asylum-seeking children in England may access. This Panel must have full understanding of the Scottish context.
- All unaccompanied asylum-seeking children must have early access to high-quality legal representation to assist them in their asylum claim.
- It is vital that good quality legal representation is available throughout the duration of a young person's claim. This should ensure that the children understand the asylum process and the consequences of different outcomes to the decision of their asylum applications.

Accommodation and housing

- The standard of accommodation available to unaccompanied asylum-seeking children must be improved. Children should not be housed in homeless hostels for even a short period of time. Access to safe, stable, clean and good quality accommodation is vital and must include the provision of appropriate cooking facilities, social support and advocacy.
- Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children must be given the same opportunity as Scottish children to be engaged in decisions about their accommodation and welfare. A Children's Rights approach should underpin this.

Information and communication

- Detailed information should be given to unaccompanied asylum-seeking children as soon as they arrive in Scotland. This should be in a format appropriate to their age and should contain information about their rights and the services available to them. This should also be distributed to organisations working with unaccompanied asylum-seeking children, to improve their knowledge.
- Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children must have access to appropriately trained interpreters.
- Service providers should not use unaccompanied asylum-seeking children to interpret for each other.

"The main thing is to be able to stay, to have asylum ... if you can be accepted, you can worry about other things, but if you don't know, you can be kicked out at any point", *Lumpungu*

"I felt really different as everything is so different to what I am used to" *Karen*

Educational needs

- It is vital that the high-quality education and support provided to most unaccompanied asylum-seeking children by schools and colleges should be available to everyone.
- Statutory and voluntary organisations need to develop out-of-school provision, after-school care services and extra curricular activities for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children.
- The Scottish Executive should give unaccompanied asylum-seeking children the same rights and entitlements to access further and higher education as all children in Scotland. For example, unaccompanied asylum-seeking children should be eligible for Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA) in Scotland as offered to all other children.

Health services

- Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children must be offered access to a range of health services in a similar manner to that offered to all children in Scotland. Attention should be paid to the children's health needs as a result of pre-flight experiences; in particular their mental health.
- Outreach services need to be developed to ensure unaccompanied asylum-seeking children access health services.

Services in general

- Refugees and members of the black and minority ethnic communities should be encouraged to work in professions which have contact with unaccompanied asylum-seeking children; including work in both statutory and voluntary organisations.

Learning opportunities for professionals and partnership working

- Inter-agency co-operation, joint working and the sharing of good practice should be encouraged through the creation of collaborative and networking opportunities.
- Steps should be taken to encourage the establishment of international links between service providers, so that Scottish service providers can gather best practice from countries with similar experience.
- An annual audit of the services provided for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children should be conducted, in order that areas of deficiency and excess can be identified and addressed.
- Further training opportunities should be made available to all service providers working with or for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children in Scotland. This training should be detailed in content, updated regularly and accessible to a range of service providers. Furthermore, this should include race awareness training, in order to ensure that practice is based on values of equality and respect.

For further information about this summary please contact Scottish Refugee Council's Policy Officer, **Gary Christie** at gary.christie@scottishrefugeecouncil.org.uk

For the full text of this report, and for more information about the work of Scottish Refugee Council visit <http://www.scottishrefugeecouncil.org.uk>

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