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A long way to go

April 2007

Eleanor Stringer

Tris Lumley

Young refugees and asylum seekers in the UK

A guide for donors and funders



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This report has been supported by the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation and the City Parochial Foundation

Cover photo supplied by Greenwich and Lewisham Young People's Theatre (Rafe Allen)

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Summary

Photograph supplied by DOST at Trinity Centre



Stefan's story is just one example of how charities can help young asylum seekers and refugees.

More than 8,000 young people aged under 18 arrive in the UK each year claiming to be fleeing violence and persecution. Some arrive alone; some arrive with their families.

The relationship between asylum and immigration is a contentious issue. But many of these children will remain legally in the UK for at least a few years, particularly those who arrive on their own. The government acknowledges the need to provide greater levels of protection and care for separated children, even if it rejects their claim for asylum. However, young people often have difficulties receiving the levels of care, support and services they need. Furthermore, asylum seekers and refugees are often marginalised and isolated, partly due to people's prejudices.

Stefan's story is just one example of how charities can help such children, rebuilding the links that have been broken.

Stefan's story

Stefan was 13 when his father went missing. He was confused and worried. No one told him what was going on, and his mother told him not to ask too many questions. Then, a few weeks later, he came home from school to find his home had been ransacked. And now his mother had disappeared too.

Stefan spent the night alone in his house. He had no idea what had happened. He did not feel scared—it did not feel real. It was as if he was in a dream.

The next day, while he was getting ready for school, his father's friend came to the house. He was told not to ask any questions. The friend told Stefan that he had to go away for a while. He was not told anything else.

He was taken to a house, where he was introduced to a man he had never seen before. This man took him to a big warehouse full of lorries. Stefan was introduced to another man, who stayed with him for the entire journey. They hid in a spare tyre inside a lorry full of containers, changing vehicles twice.

Once in the UK, the man took Stefan to a hotel for the night. The next day, the man left him outside a solicitor's office and told him to go inside. Stefan never saw the man again. With the help of an interpreter, he told the solicitor what had happened. The interpreter took pity on him and gave him a place to stay.

Later that week, Stefan was taken to the Home Office to claim asylum. They contacted social services and he was put into foster care.

Like many newly arrived asylum seekers, Stefan was unable to get a school place when he arrived. Luckily, DOST at Trinity Centre in east London runs a full-time education programme for young refugees out of school. Stefan began attending this within a week, having met the teacher beforehand to help him feel settled. After a few months on the education programme, a place was found for Stefan at a mainstream school.

Stefan continued his involvement at DOST through its social events, activities and advocacy services. He was moved out of foster care, and now lives in a house with three other boys. DOST has been with him through these changes, and has become a parental figure in his life, providing support and a sense of security.

'You know when you have a mum you only have one mum, you have arguments but you know you will still go back to her ... [DOST] is like your mum, you feel raised by her.'

DOST was able to help Stefan, a boy who had lost everything in extraordinary circumstances, rebuild his confidence and start his life again.

'From my heart, this place has given me a head start and it's somewhere I come back to for peace of mind.'

With DOST's support, Stefan has developed great ambitions for the future: *'I want to study IT at university, I also want to travel, I want to help people [by doing things] like giving out aid.'*

Priorities for donors

NPC found many inspiring examples of projects helping marginalised young people like Stefan. This report is based on eight months' research involving desk-based research, expert consultation and visits to charities and analysis of their work. Visit the NPC website at www.philanthropycapital.org for a full methodology.

We highlight three areas where the work of charities is critical, and where donors can make an important contribution:

- Supporting children through the asylum process and lobbying for a robust system;
- Accessing education and improving other services; and
- Increasing refugee children's integration into the community.

Supporting children through the asylum process

The asylum process for the 3,000 asylum-seeking children who arrive on their own each year is complicated and constantly changing. Even though 95% are not accepted by the Home Office as refugees, most are given leave to remain until they are 18, at which point their status changes and they may face detention and removal.

Although not all those who apply will have a legitimate need for international protection, there are concerns amongst children's charities and lawyers about the possibility of errors being made. For example, a boy like Stefan will not be able to talk about the reasons for his family's persecution, because he does not know the details. This lack of evidence makes the government's job difficult, but it can also result in children with legitimate claims being refused protection as refugees.

Charities can help individuals by supporting them through the asylum process. They also have an important role to play in lobbying the government to ensure that the system is robust enough to recognise genuine claims as well as challenging false ones.

Accessing education and improving other services

Many asylum-seeking children will live in the UK legitimately for at least a few years. Most unaccompanied—or 'separated'—children tend to be allowed to remain in the UK until they are 18. Children in families will be here whilst a decision is being made on their claim or appeal, which can take a long time.

During this time, they are entitled to the same services as other children, including education and healthcare. Children who arrive on their own count as 'children in need' and are looked

after by social services. However, the reality is that asylum-seeking children often do not receive the same support or have the same opportunities as citizen children. Charities play an important role in helping individuals get the support they need, and lobbying for better treatment of all refugee and asylum-seeking children.

Increasing refugee children's integration into the community

Asylum-seeking and refugee children do not have much money, and can lead isolated lives. Charities can help improve their social life by providing them with opportunities to socialise with other refugee children and the wider community. They can also help young people gain the confidence to do this themselves, by helping them develop their skills and self-esteem.

Structure of this report

The introduction to this report provides a profile of child refugees and asylum seekers: who they are, where they come from and why they come to the UK.

Section 1 outlines the asylum process for children who arrive on their own, including an examination of issues around establishing an applicant's age. The detention of children who arrive with their families is also discussed.

The second section focuses on charities working to support children, both 'separated' and in families, whilst they are in the UK.

The third section looks at the problems asylum-seeking children encounter when they turn 18, and the support charities can offer at this crucial transitional stage.

The report concludes by outlining priorities for donors wishing to make an impact on the lives of refugees and asylum seekers.

Many asylum-seeking children will live in the UK legitimately for at least a few years.

Introduction: Who are child refugees and asylum seekers?

There are at least 60,000 refugee children in the UK.

Child asylum seekers and refugees make up one of the most disadvantaged groups in the country—most of those who have fled have no money. These young people also represent one of the most marginalised groups, partly due to hostile public opinion about immigrants in general, and asylum seekers in particular.

Donors thinking about helping these children need to understand who they are and why they are in the UK.

Profile of child refugees and asylum seekers

This report is about children and young people who were under 18 years old when they claimed asylum in the UK. Although they are children, they are still subject to immigration control.

How many children are there?

One obvious place to start in order to understand the scope of the issue is to look at the number of children affected.

There are at least 60,000 refugee children in the UK, according to estimates.¹ They make up about 20% of the estimated total refugee population in the country.² They may be fleeing persecution and are likely to have experienced violence and loss. They have often had a long and traumatic journey.

We only have estimates about the total number of refugee and asylum-seeking children in the UK, partly because many come as dependants of other applicants and are therefore hidden in the Home Office statistics.

Figure 1 gives a breakdown of the numbers of 'separated' children (those who arrive without family), the numbers of young people whose age is disputed, and the number of children in families who arrive each year.

Children first and foremost

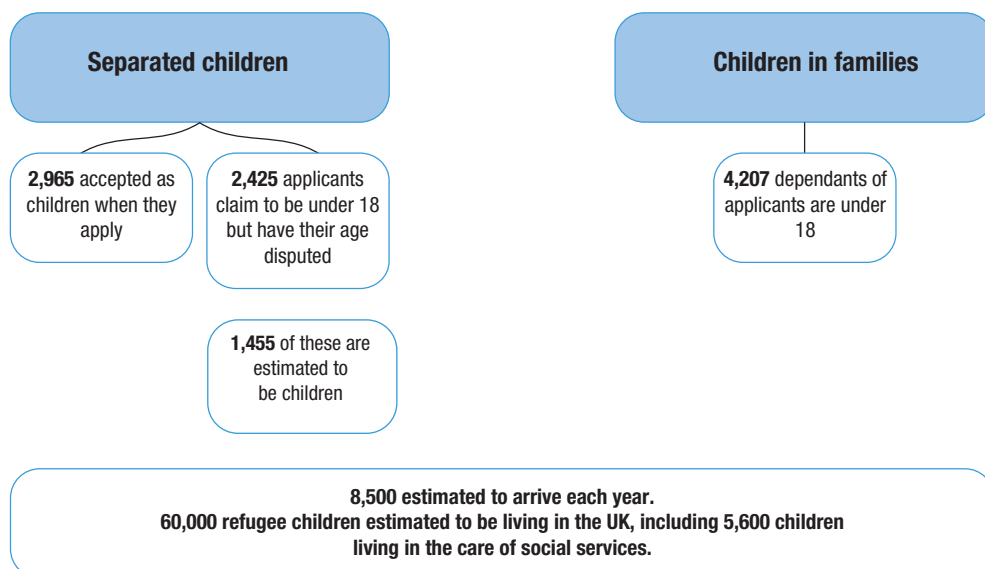
A child is anyone under 18 years of age defined by both UK and international law. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) sets out the rights of children worldwide, and the obligations of states that have ratified it to all children in their country. These include obligations to:

- protect children from discrimination (article 2);
- ensure that all actions concerning the child should make his or her best interests a primary consideration (article 3);
- grant special protection to children who are refugees or asylum seekers (article 22).

The UK is a signatory to the UNCRC. However, in order to protect its borders, it entered a reservation about non-British children when it signed the Convention. Specifically, the reservation allows it to withhold the rights of non-citizen children—including refugee and asylum-seeking children—in relation to entering and leaving the country and obtaining citizenship.⁶

The reservation highlights the tension between the government's commitment to children's rights and well-being as enshrined in the UNCRC and its children's policies on the one hand, and its immigration policies on the other.⁷ This is most apparent in cases where children are detained as part of the asylum process.

Figure 1: Numbers of asylum-seeking children arriving in 2005^{1, 3-5}



Furthermore, the Children Act (2004) includes a lengthy list of all the agencies that must have *'regard to the need to safeguard and promote the welfare of children'*. Immigration officers, the National Asylum Support Service (NASS) and managers of removal centres are conspicuous in their absence from this list, despite their daily work with vulnerable child refugees.

Refugees and asylum seekers

The term 'refugees' and 'asylum seekers' have specific legal meanings, entailing different rights and entitlements. The term **refugee** refers to someone recognised as a person fleeing persecution and granted protection. A person applying for refugee status is known as an **asylum seeker**.

In this report, for simplicity's sake, the term **child refugee** will refer to any child coming to the UK in search of asylum, no matter what their status.

The UK is a signatory to the 1951 United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees. The Convention sets out requirements for the treatment of refugees. According to the Convention, a refugee is:

- *'A person who has a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion'; and*
- *'Someone who is outside the country of his/her nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself/herself of the protection of that country.'*

When someone arrives in a country and claims asylum, the government must decide if it thinks the applicant meets this description, and therefore if the country must offer them safety and protection. This will be discussed further in Section 1. Children may apply for asylum in their own right, or they may be a dependant of another person claiming asylum.

Refugees are often referred to as forced migrants. They are less likely than other migrants to have had any real choice about leaving their country of origin in the first place or about which country they flee to.⁸

Children and young people are even less likely than adults to have freely chosen to leave their country or to come to the UK. This applies both to those who fled with their families, and those who arrive unaccompanied. They may be wholly innocent victims caught up in the difficult circumstances of those around them, and the decisions and actions that arise from such experiences. For potential donors, it is worth noting that this is likely to apply equally to those children fleeing persecution and to economic migrants.

Box 1: Some experiences of child refugees

Fahim was just 14 when he was arrested in Afghanistan for taking a photograph of a Taliban militiaman beating a woman and girl on the street. He was taken to prison where his head was shaved and he was flogged. He was told that his hands were going to be amputated and that he would be killed. He was then placed in solitary confinement for 29 days.¹⁰

Eva was 15 when she was taken from her home in Africa by a family 'friend'. She had been staying with a guardian following the murder of her parents. Her guardian thought the 'friend' would find her a job. Instead, she was taken round different countries in Africa and raped repeatedly. She was taken to London when she was 16 and continued to be sexually exploited. She managed to escape and lived on the streets until a stranger took her to a refuge and she applied for asylum.¹¹

Prince, a young asylum seeker: *'I lost my family. I lost my brother. I lost my father. I lost everything.'*¹²

Separated children

'Separated' children are those *'under 18 years of age who are outside their country of origin and separated from both parents, or their previous legal/customary primary caregiver.'*¹⁹ There are nearly 3,000 asylum applications a year from separated children.³

The Home Office differentiates between separated children, whom it calls 'unaccompanied asylum-seeking children', and other claimants. They are treated differently in the asylum process and receive care from social services because they are on their own. Children in families, on the other hand, receive support from NASS.

These labels are fairly crude. For instance, a child may meet the description of 'separated' and still not be strictly unaccompanied. They may have travelled with siblings, relatives or they may have been brought here with others by an agent who arranged the trip, but who is unable or unwilling to care for them once in the UK.¹³ More worryingly they might have been trafficked for exploitation, and experts advise that children can appear unaccompanied but actually still be under the control of their trafficker.¹⁴

Children in families

On the other hand, there may be children who arrive accompanied, but their accompanier may not be in a position to look after them. The child may have travelled with an extended family member, even though this person may be an older sibling barely into adulthood themselves.¹³ The majority arrive with their immediate families. In 2005, 4,207 children arrived as dependants of adult asylum applicants.³

Some of the issues facing children who arrive here with their families or other adult carers were dealt with NPC's report on adult refugees and asylum seekers, *Home Truths*.⁸ This includes issues such as the family's access to benefits and housing through NASS, and the journey through the asylum process. However, there are specific issues relating to children that will be discussed in more detail in this report.

Children and young people are less likely than adults to have freely chosen to have left their country or to come to the UK.

Box 2: Sabir’s journey to the UK¹²

‘On the way I was just following this man ... I didn’t know anything ... I didn’t know where I was going. I didn’t know anything, I was just the luggage taken here and there.’

Reasons why children seek asylum include being recruited as child soldiers; being forced in prostitution or labour; and the risk of female genital mutilation.

Reasons for seeking asylum

Frustratingly for donors, very little is known about the experiences of refugee children in their country of origin or their journey.¹⁵ It is research done by charities, such as **Immigration Law Practitioners’ Association**⁷ that forms the basis of current knowledge. One small study by the **Scottish Refugee Council** found that the main reasons for flight were: death or persecution of family members; persecution of the child; forced recruitment; war; trafficking; and lack of education and opportunity.¹² Box 1 gives some examples of the problems some child refugees have experienced.

Children in some countries are being recruited into the armed forces and militia from as young as ten years old. Others are forced into prostitution or child labour.⁷ Young girls in some countries are expected to undergo female genital mutilation or forced marriage.

Some of these circumstances are clearly sufficient to expect an asylum claim to be considered seriously by the Home Office as a basis for granting refugee status or other protection, though fleeing from poverty or a lack of education is not. An unknown proportion of applicants may be economic migrants seeking a better life and greater opportunities. The only available data about the number who might fall into this category is from the Home Office, which rejects the claims

of 95% of separated children’s applications for asylum.³ This does not necessarily mean that the Home Office believes that they are economic migrants.

As will be discussed in Section 1, the legal tests for establishing a well-founded fear of persecution to meet the definition of a refugee are very tough. Consequently the government might legitimately refuse to recognise someone as a refugee without passing judgement on their reason for being here. However, there may be children with a legitimate case for being granted refugee status who are not able to make their case strongly enough to convince the Home Office.

Available knowledge about these children’s experiences is limited, partly because children may find it difficult to discuss their experiences. Adults working with them may also be reluctant to probe. The child’s reticence could be due to past events, such as trauma, loss, violence, or simply out of ignorance about what happened.

Why do some children and young people travel without their parents?

Children flee their home country without their parents or guardians for many reasons. Their parents may be dead, missing, imprisoned, or they may have had to flee the country themselves. Friends and family may have helped the child to leave the country, often using agents who arrange their travel and bring them into the country clandestinely. Like Stefan, whose story we shared in the Summary, Sabir (see Box 2) had no idea what was happening to him when he fled his country.

In many cases, children may have had to arrange to travel on their own. In other cases, the parents may decide to send the child away and make the necessary arrangements, due to worries about the safety of the child in their country.¹³

Where do they come from?

Child refugees come from countries where there are conflicts and human rights abuses. Table 1 shows the top ten countries of origin for unaccompanied children in 2005, compared with the arrivals from those countries in 1999. Changes in application rates sometimes reflect changing situations in the home countries. For example, the increase in applications from Afghanistan, Iraq and Iran correlate with increasing conflict and deteriorating human rights situations there. The numbers arriving from Somalia have been consistently high since the bitter civil war began in the early 1990s. Other changes—such as the increases from Vietnam—are more surprising, and may relate to trends in human smuggling and trafficking.

Table 1: Countries of origin^{3, 16, 17}

Top countries of origin of unaccompanied minors in 2005	Applications from unaccompanied minors in 2005	Applications from unaccompanied minors in 1999
Afghanistan	530	215
Iran	450	15
Somalia	235	190
Eritrea	195	95
Iraq	170	60
China	170	165
Democratic Republic of Congo	145	35
Vietnam	120	5
Nigeria	80	45
Guinea	60	1
Out of a total of	2,965	3,349

Where are the children?

Separated children are not dispersed around the country to be accommodated, unlike adult asylum seekers and their children. They become the responsibility of the local authority where they arrive or where they are living when they apply for asylum. However, there are currently 'dispersal pilots' underway and the Home Office is reviewing its policy on asylum-seeking children.⁵ It is likely that in the near future children will be dispersed to certain local authorities.

At the moment, most separated children are in London and the south east, near to entry ports and existing ethnic communities. Those areas where there are international airports or ports have a much higher number of separated children under their care than more remote authorities. The London Borough of Hillingdon, which contains Heathrow airport, unsurprisingly has the highest number of separated children under its care. Croydon, Liverpool and Solihull in Birmingham also have a high number due to the presence of asylum screening units, as does Kent, because of the port of Dover.

Since 2000, children in families needing accommodation have been dispersed to the north east and north west of England, and Glasgow in Scotland. Nearly a third of families choose to forego NASS accommodation in order to remain with their family and friends, mainly in London and the south east.³

Gender

Most separated children are male. Three out of four applicants applying in 2005 who claimed to be under 18 were male,³ which is a very similar proportion to adult applicants. There is an even split between the genders amongst the child dependants of other asylum seekers.

How old are they?

Most separated applicants are aged 16-17—55% of applicants in 2005. This is not surprising, as older children are more likely to have travelled here on their own. However, this still means that nearly half of all child applicants are under the age of 16. At this age, citizen children are generally in full-time education and living with their families.

Children who arrive here in families are in general younger than those who arrive alone—over 90% are under 15.³

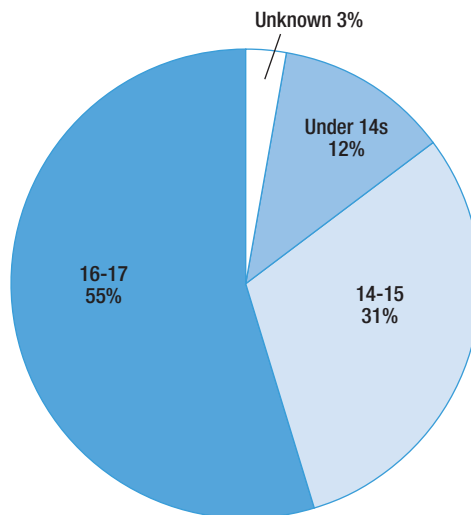
Section 1 deals with the complicated problem of determining people's ages when there is disagreement about whether they are a child or not.

Box 3: Lucy's story¹⁴

Lucy is a 16-year-old Congolese girl, brought to the UK by a man who was a friend of her deceased father. Lucy thought she was coming here for an education and to be cared for. Instead she was held against her will in the agent's house and made to do domestic work. She was told to sleep in the bathroom, and the man beat her and tried to have sex with her.

A female friend of the man helped Lucy escape and took her to social services.

Figure 2: Age of separated asylum seeking children applying in 2005³



Trafficking victims

There may be many children who are invisible to authorities, such as those involved in private fostering arrangements that social services are unaware of, or those who arrive as the children of illegal immigrants.¹

One group with a high media profile, but about whom very little is known, is children who are thought to have been trafficked to the UK. Trafficking is different to smuggling. The motive of the smuggler is to make money out of illegally transporting people to different countries. In contrast, trafficking is defined as:

*'the recruitment, transport, or sale of human beings into sexual exploitation, forced labour and servitude.'*¹⁸

The idea of trafficking often brings to mind images of children being kidnapped and bundled into the back of lorries, before arriving in a new country and being forced into prostitution.

The real situation appears to be much more complicated than this. The child may not be kidnapped in the conventional sense, but instead may have been promised a better life by their trafficker, who then forces them or their family to pay the supposed costs of transporting them. There have been cases of West African children being controlled by the threat of the practice of voodoo and the fear

The increase in applications from Afghanistan, Iraq and Iran correlate with increasing conflict and deteriorating human rights situations there.

Box 4: An excerpt from the Refugee Arrivals Project pamphlet for separated children, *Where am I?*

'Sometimes children are forced to come to the UK by adults, made to do things they don't want to and told what to say if asked. This is sometimes called "Trafficking". In these situations children are usually too scared to tell anyone or ask for help. But, there are people in the UK who work hard to help these children. Some of these people work at the airport, and if you are one of these children, you can tell someone.'

of harm coming to their family if they tried to escape.¹⁴ Box 3 tells the story of one trafficked girl from the Democratic Republic of Congo.

A recent police operation found 84 victims of trafficking being used for sexual exploitation—12 of them were under 18.¹⁹ However, what happens when they get here is not necessarily prostitution. There are also anecdotes of children working in cannabis factories, restaurants and domestic servitude.

The scale of the problem is unknown due to its clandestine nature, the lack of a coordinated approach by authorities and the limited amount of research done in this area. Some of these children are known to social services when they arrive and apply for asylum as instructed by their trafficker, but then go missing soon after they arrive.¹⁴ Recent research by the charities **ECPAT UK** and **Save the Children** found, across three regions, 48 cases of children going missing from social services care.²⁰

Others may be able to escape from their situation and then apply for asylum, but we know little about those who do not come into contact with authorities—those who are the most vulnerable of all.

Also, one common characteristic of trafficked children is that they actually pretend to be older than they are.²¹ If the Home Office does not pick up that they are lying, they are unlikely to come into contact with social services.

Despite the possibility that these children may not come into contact with authorities at all, 26 out of 33 boroughs in London are concerned that they have a trafficking problem.¹⁴

Many of the charities working with child refugees have worked with children who they think have been trafficked. **ECPAT UK (End Child Prostitution, Child Pornography and the Trafficking of Children for Sexual Purposes)** is a coalition of charities that researches, campaigns and lobbies government to increase legislation and action on trafficking. It also works with police and other agencies to highlight issues, such as how to identify trafficking victims. It is the only organisation focusing on this issue, but there is little evidence or evaluation of such work given the complicated nature of the problem.

The Young Person's Adviser from **Refugee Arrivals Project**, who sees some of the young people as they arrive unaccompanied at Heathrow, plays an important role in helping the police to identify child trafficking victims, and supporting children who may be too scared to speak out. As discussed in more detail in the next section, he hands out a leaflet to separated children, explaining the process for claiming asylum and giving information about people to contact for help. The leaflet explains about trafficking to children who may not understand how vulnerable they are, or how they can be helped (Box 4).



Photograph supplied by Information Centre about Asylum and Refugees

Arriving in the UK

Once they arrive in this country, separated children have to negotiate complicated systems for claiming asylum and receiving care. Most are refused asylum but are allowed to remain on a discretionary basis, normally until they are 18. Very few end up with a permanent right to live in the UK.

The process for claiming asylum as a separated child can be very complex and confusing, both for the child and for the professionals working with them. In this section, donors can learn about what separated children face when they claim asylum. There is an important role for charities to provide further support to children and professionals, and to ensure that the asylum system is robust.

Asylum process

There are two major obstacles the government faces in trying to abide by the Refugee Convention when dealing with children's asylum claims. Firstly, there is the fact that a significant proportion may not have a '*well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion*', and therefore do not meet the description of a refugee. They may be economic migrants, or fleeing for reasons that do not fit these strict criteria. The Home Office's decision-making process is discussed later in this section. Secondly, some asylum applicants may pretend to be children to receive better treatment. The complicated issue of age disputes is also covered in this section.

Failed asylum seekers face destitution, and the risk of detention and removal to their country of origin. While this is not an imminent threat for separated children, it is a real prospect once they turn 18. It is therefore important that those in need of protection are given it, to ensure their safety and well-being. On the other hand, a system that treats asylum seekers who are not fleeing persecution too leniently may attract other migrants to use the asylum system as a way of getting into the country. That said, little evidence for such 'pull' factors has been found in practice.⁸

The asylum process for children and adults is currently undergoing significant changes, so this section will not dwell on details that may change in the near future. The diagram in the Appendix provides an overview of the current system for separated children.

Box 5: Example of a child being unable to talk about her experience¹³

Cecile is from an African country and the eldest in her family. Her mother had been involved in a political group fighting on behalf of women and marginalised people. Her father belonged to a different political party and when the government began to target members of her mother's political group he left his family since he was afraid he would lose his social position due to the activities of his wife. After her father left, soldiers came to the house often. They beat Cecile, her mother and sisters and raped them all. Her younger sister became very ill afterwards.

After one of these incidents Cecile's mother decided to send her away. Here in the UK she is very distressed thinking of her family and reliving scenes of violence and rape. She is terrified of being attacked here in the UK and fearful of sleeping. She has been unable to tell her story to her lawyer.

A child's immigration status has an important effect on his or her well-being, both immediately and in the future. It is therefore important that children are supported throughout the process. At the moment, support is mainly provided by social workers and, for some children, by charities. Currently, charities in the **Refugee Children's Consortium** (Box 8) are campaigning for separated children to be assigned a guardian to advise and protect them whilst their asylum claim is being processed. This should improve the child's experience of the process, make sure that decisions take into account the interests of the child and improve the results of the system.

Given the complexity of applying for asylum, it is important that those working with children have access to accurate information. **Save the Children** publishes clear and concise guides on the rights and entitlements of separated refugee children, aimed at professionals such as social workers. The **Children's Legal Centre** website also has up-to-date information at the click of a mouse.

Children claiming asylum as dependants of adults go through the system described in NPC's report, *Home truths*. It can be a difficult and anxious time for children, even if they are shielded from the full situation by their parents. Section 2 discusses the mental health of young refugees, and how parents' problems can affect their children. The use of detention as part of the asylum process is discussed later on in this section.

Most separated children are refused asylum, but are allowed to remain in the UK until they are 18.

Box 6: Example of a refusal letter received by a 14-year-old child²²

'The Secretary of State for the Home Department is of the view that you were aware of the plot to overthrow the legitimate and democratic government of [your] country [and should not have participated in this unlawful activity] ... He is [also] of the view that you did not stop to think that as a child you should not take part in such activities and neither should you be handling a gun.'

Even the Home Office admits that the policy of granting a period of leave to all children affects the attention given to children's claims.

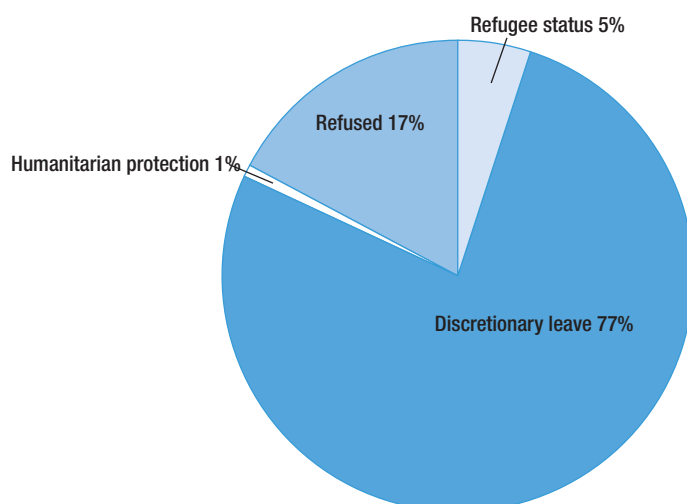
Claiming asylum

People can claim asylum when they first arrive at the port of entry, or at an asylum screening unit once in the UK. Statistics show that 82% of children apply once in the country.³ This implies that they enter the country clandestinely, either on fake documents or by being smuggled in. The proportion is similar with adult applicants.

Those children arriving unaccompanied at Heathrow airport during the working week are likely to meet with the **Refugee Arrivals Project's** Young Person's Adviser. A trained counsellor, he is able to provide comfort and support. As mentioned in the previous section, he carries small leaflets outlining what will happen at the airport to the children (see Box 4) as well as the contact details of the **Refugee Council's** specialist Children's Panel, amongst others. The leaflet is translated into nine languages and is given out to separated children so that, if the Adviser cannot see them, they will have some understanding of the process.

When any child claims to be a refugee, they will have a brief initial interview, and will be given their asylum application form. Once they have received this, the child must find a legal representative to make his or her case for asylum to the Home Office by completing the form. They have 28 days to do this, otherwise they can be refused on grounds of non-compliance. This time limit may be reduced in the future.

Figure 3: Outcomes of separated children's asylum claims³

**Decision-making and outcomes**

The children's asylum process is different from that for adults. While most children are allowed to stay until they are 18 (77% in 2005³), having been granted discretionary leave, their asylum claims are rejected at the same time, leaving them very exposed to removal as failed asylum seekers on or soon after their 18th birthday. Figure 3 shows the outcomes for children's claims. Some 17% are refused outright, perhaps because they failed to return their application in time, or if it is decided that they are actually over 18 and go through the adult asylum process (see section on age disputes later on). It is currently very unlikely that they will be refused outright on the basis of the credibility of their asylum claim.

The Home Office only accepts 5% of all separated children's claims for asylum, which it currently judges on the basis of written evidence submitted by the child's lawyer. It grants a further 1% humanitarian protection, if the Home Office does not accept that they meet the refugee criteria, but still decides that it is too dangerous for them to return to their country of origin. In other words, the government does not believe that 19 out of 20 of the children applying for asylum have a well-founded fear of persecution.

Although not all children have a case to stay in the UK, charities point out that the Home Office's decision-making procedure may not be robust, and therefore it might erroneously reject a child's claim. For example:

- NPC's report, *Home truths*, discussed significant concerns about the way asylum claims are processed. The National Audit Office and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees have both expressed grave misgivings about the Home Office's decisions. Box 6 gives an example of a refusal letter by the Home Office that is not untypical.²²
- The evidence the Home Office receives may not give a full account of the child's story. For example, the child may not know the full circumstances of their flight (as with Stefan, in the Summary) or they may be unwilling to reveal the reasons for it (as in cases like Cecile, whose story is told in Box 5).
- Even the Home Office admits that the current policy to allow nearly all children to remain until they are 18, even if their claim is rejected, affects the attention given to children's claims.²² This means that they may be rejected due to lack of proper scrutiny.
- The child may have difficulties finding good legal representation, especially given the minimal legal aid available to solicitors taking on asylum cases. Children need a solicitor who is able to be patient and understand their particular needs. Such specialists are rare.

- Research by human rights lawyers found that there is a culture of disbelief towards children's asylum claims within the Home Office.²²

There is need for a much more child-sensitive asylum determination process, which takes into account the issues listed above. As it stands, there is a higher chance of errors being made in children's asylum cases than in adult cases.⁷ This means that some children fleeing persecution may, when they turn 18, be removed to their country of origin, even though it may not be safe for them to return.

Charities can help decrease the risk of errors being made in the decision-making system by providing legal support. **The Children's Society** has started an innovative project in Sheffield, which will support solicitors dealing with children's cases. There are currently only a few solicitors taking on this work in the South Yorkshire area, so they are very stretched.

The Children's Society project workers will liaise with solicitors, for example, by preparing background information to support the claim. They will also support the child so that they fully understand the process and develop trust, in the hope that they are more likely to discuss their reasons for claiming asylum and feel less scared by the process. This is a new project, so its impact remains to be seen. However, charities providing legal support to adults in the asylum process have had some important results, suggesting the model is an effective one. For example, **Asylum Aid** provides legal advice to adult asylum seekers who are appealing against a refusal on their asylum claim. It has a success rate of 70%, compared with an appeal success rate of 23% overall.²³

Box 7: How charities can help in the asylum process

A is a 16-year-old who arrived from Uganda with her 8-year-old niece. They had both been raped. The Home Office turned down their claim for asylum despite there being a clear danger to them if they returned to their country. The **Refugee Council Children's Panel** worked to ensure that the evidence and information was gathered to include in a case to the Home Office. They have now been granted Indefinite Leave to Remain in this country.

The **Refugee Council Children's Panel** can help a child find good legal representation and accompany them to meetings with their solicitor and the Home Office. It can help to ensure that the Home Office is made aware of all available evidence. Box 7 gives an example of how such evidence can persuade the Home Office to recognise children's asylum claims.

The **Medical Foundation for the Care of Victims of Torture** provides treatment and medical and legal reports to corroborate the asylum claims of both adults and children who have experienced violence and torture, as well as specialist background information about torture. It has a child specialist clinical team and a legal adviser with expertise in child asylum and welfare matters. Many other charities that provide advocacy support will accompany the child to meetings with the Home Office and solicitors, as can their social worker.

Charities play a critical role in challenging poor decisions and advocating against poor policy based on the evidence amassed from individual decisions. **The Refugee Children's Consortium** (Box 8) brings together charities to lobby the government on legal and policy issues affecting children's welfare and their immigration status.

Charities play a critical role in challenging poor decisions and advocating against poor policy based on the evidence amassed from individual decisions.



Photograph supplied by DOST at Trinity Centre

Box 8: Refugee Children's Consortium

The Refugee Children's Consortium is a coalition of a number of charities for children and refugees, which is currently chaired by The Children's Society. These charities work together to ensure that children's needs and rights are promoted and respected. It is able to draw on the strengths of its various members, and lobbies government on all the issues discussed in this report, including the need for a better decision-making process, returns of children, the rights of age-disputed young people and access to social service care.

Members of the Consortium are: *The Asphaelia Project, The Association of London Somali Organisations, Association of Visitors to Immigration Detainees, Bail for Immigration Detainees, Barnardo's, British Association of Social Workers, British Associations for Adoption and Fostering, Children's Legal Centre, Child Poverty Action Group, Children's Rights Alliance for England, The Children's Society, The Fostering Network, Family Service Units, The Immigration Law Practitioners' Association, Medical Foundation for the Care of Victims of Torture, National Children's Bureau, NCH, NSPCC, Redbridge Refugee Forum, Refugee Council, Refugee Arrivals Project, Refugee Legal Centre, Scottish Refugee Council, Save The Children UK and Voice. The British Red Cross, UNICEF UK and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) all have observer status.*

One in three
births worldwide
is not registered

Discretionary leave

Separated children tend to be given 'Discretionary Leave' and are allowed to remain in the UK. In 2005, 77% of decisions on children's claims resulted in the grant of discretionary leave.³ All children in the UK have the same rights and entitlements as British children. However, as will be seen in Section 2, asylum-seeking children may have difficulties getting access to the basic services, such as education and healthcare, that they are entitled to.

Discretionary leave is normally granted until the child turns 18. However, applicants from certain countries that the Home Office deems to be safe, such as Albania and Jamaica, will be granted only 12 months discretionary leave.

Being granted leave to remain is a refusal of a young person's asylum application. Once their leave is over, they cannot apply for asylum again apart from the in the rare cases where fresh evidence that supports their claim has come to light.

Returns

The government does not currently return separated asylum-seeking children to their country of origin if they have been refused refugee status. The basis for this policy is that few countries have adequate reception and care arrangements for returned asylum-seeking children.

The government is reassessing this policy and attempting to put in place better protection measures in countries such as Vietnam and Angola in order to allow for returns of children. It is also increasing the returns of those who have turned 18.

Charities question whether the arrangements the government proposes would be adequate to protect children from the risk of being

trafficked. Vietnam, for example is a well-known 'source' country of trafficking. As long as there are concerns about the quality of the Home Office's decisions, there is a strong argument against returning vulnerable children to their home countries. Charities involved in the lobbying group, the **Refugee Children's Consortium** (see Box 8), have fought against the returns programme, due to concerns for the welfare of children.

On the other hand, the current situation where children who may have legitimately fled persecution are granted leave for a few years before abruptly losing their status and drifting into limbo or being removed is far from ideal. The result is that children and young people settle into life in the UK, forge links here, learn English and possibly lose their mother tongue, before being uprooted again.

The focus should be on ensuring that those needing safety are given it, by improving the decisions on asylum claims.

Appeals and extensions

Some children, though not all, have the right to appeal against the refusal of their asylum claim, and all can apply for an extension of leave. This will be dealt with in Section 3, as this mainly affects what happens when young people turn 18 and their discretionary leave runs out.

Age disputes

Both the Home Office and social services departments that are responsible for caring for separated children can dispute the age of anyone applying for asylum who claims to be under 18. If they are officially 'age disputed', they are treated as an adult until the Home Office receives credible evidence that suggests the 'disputed minor' is actually a child.

There are no official figures on how many children are age-disputed, but **Refugee Council** estimates, on the basis of a small study done of age assessments done on age-disputed young people held in one detention centre, that 60% of age-disputed young people are later assessed to be children.⁴

Numbers of age disputes

The official guidance is that the claimant **must** be given the benefit of the doubt unless their appearance **strongly** suggests that they are over 18 (emphasis in original).²⁴ However, young people's ages are regularly disputed either by the Home Office or by social services,²⁵ which are responsible for providing care for separated children whilst they are in the UK.

In 2005, the authorities questioned the age of 45% of all applicants claiming to be under 18. Data has only been available for the past two

years, but anecdotal evidence suggests that the number of disputes over applicants' ages has increased substantially.⁷

Given that over half of those initially accepted as children are aged 16-17, it is no surprise that age disputes are such a common phenomenon.

Why age disputes happen

Age disputes happen for a number of reasons. One in three births worldwide is not registered,⁷ and many children and young people arrive with false documents or no documents at all. This means it often comes down to how old the young person says they are, and whether the authorities believe them or not.

Adults may claim to be younger than they are because they believe that this will lead to better treatment. Or an immigration official may consider the person to look or behave as though they are older than they say. Again, the fact that most child applicants are aged 16-17 makes the task of distinguishing those aged 18 and over very difficult.

Assessing someone's age is an inexact science, made difficult by issues such as:²⁷

- Young people may look and act older than they are because of their experience in their country of origin;
- Similarly, young people who have fled their home countries have taken on very adult responsibilities and so may come across as more mature than their real age;
- Boys in some parts of the world grow facial hair earlier than boys in Europe;
- Different calendars are used in some countries, and converting from one calendar to another can be difficult.

Challenging age disputes

The Home Office's judgement is often based on nothing more than the person's appearance and behaviour during an (often brief) meeting with an immigration official.

The Immigration and Nationality Directorate (IND), the section of the Home Office responsible for asylum applications, claims that the applicant has '*a readily accessible route to challenge IND's decision to dispute a claimant's claim to be a child*'²⁴ because of an agreement whereby the IND will accept a social services assessment as credible proof of age. Social services are expected to spend time doing a thorough assessment, drawing on a wide range of evidence.

Furthermore, the IND must advise the **Refugee Council Children's Panel** of any asylum applicant claiming to be a child, including age-disputed applicants.

Table 2^{3, 26}

Year	Number of applicants accepted as under 18	Number of applicants whose age is disputed
2005	2,965	2,425
2004	2,990	2,345

However, the Home Office does not routinely refer age-disputed children to social services for an assessment. If it is left to the young person to arrange this, it is likely that they do not understand their rights and therefore will not seek to have an assessment. Even if they do, they may have difficulty finding social services willing to do an assessment.²⁸ The Home Office cannot rely on the over-stretched **Refugee Council Children's Panel** to help the young person find a social services department to complete an assessment. However, the Children's Panel does prioritise age-disputed cases, due to the potential for children to be mistreated if they are wrongly thought to be adults. The case study in Box 9 highlights how hard it is to get an assessment done.

Even if the young person is able to get social services to assess them, there are concerns about the social service assessments themselves. Reasons for such worries include:

- The difficulty of doing age assessments, for reasons mentioned above. This problem is worsened by the fact that social services may not have the resources or expertise to undertake the time-consuming and complex process.
- The social services department will probably have to look after the young person if they are found to be under 18, creating a potential conflict of interest.
- A report by **Save the Children** found that some social services have an institutionalised attitude of scepticism towards age-disputed cases, believing that '*Asylum-seekers pretend that they're younger*.'²⁹

There are cases of the Home Office not accepting the judgement made by a social services department if it assesses the young

The Refugee Council Children's Panel can help age-disputed young people get a thorough assessment of their age carried out.

Box 9: Age disputes

A young man from Afghanistan arrived in the UK and claimed asylum. He stated he was 16, but the Home Office did not believe his age and placed him in a detention centre. The **Refugee Council Children's Panel** was contacted by a visitor to the detention centre. A Panel Adviser visited him and felt strongly that he was the age he stated. They requested an age assessment from the local social services, but social services were adamant that they did not have the resources to conduct the assessment for a further two weeks. The Children's Panel continued to lobby social services and involved a solicitor in the case, and the assessment was brought forward. When assessed, the young man was judged to be 16 and immediately released from detention.

Figure 4: Possible consequences of age assessments

		Person's actual age	
		Applicant is a child	Applicant is over 18
Home Office/Social Services decision	Applicant accepted as a child	Child put into social services accommodation, has access to social worker and has same rights as citizen children to services such as education	Adult may be placed with children in accommodation; given greater rights and access to supported services than other asylum seekers
	Applicant is age-disputed	Child may be unlawfully detained with adults; put through fast-track system; might be deported; will be accommodated with adults by NASS; not given support and have very limited access to education.	Adult is treated like other adults in the asylum system.

Monitoring by the Refugee Council found that over 60% of age-disputed individuals detained at one reception centre were later assessed to be children.

person to be a child.⁷ This is despite official guidelines stating that the social services assessment is acceptable evidence of age. The **Children's Legal Centre** website and advice service provides information about the rights of refugee and asylum-seeking children. Professionals like social workers can use this to access up-to-date information about issues such as challenging age disputes. It can also take on cases and push for assessments to be undertaken or overturned.

Possible consequences of age disputes

Given the many ways in which the age assessment process can fail, it is likely that many children slip through the net and are treated as adults. Furthermore, some children may pretend to be older than they are—for example, if they have been told to do so by a trafficker.

This section details the immigration process that separated minors have to negotiate. If they are age-disputed, and therefore treated as adults, they may go through very different systems. Figure 4 shows some possible consequences of incorrect age assessments.

Detention and removal

One very undesirable consequence for an age-disputed minor is that they may be detained in an immigration removal centre as part of the asylum process. Although children in families can be detained for immigration purposes, as discussed later in this section, it is government policy not to detain separated children. If a child is wrongly thought to be an adult, they might be detained with other adults in settings without any child protection procedures. This is a direct breach of children's rights. No special provision will be made for their health or education needs.

Following a number of expensive lawsuits, with involvement of charities such as the **Children's Legal Centre**, the Home Office has changed its policy so that age-disputed minors should

no longer be detained as part of the asylum process.⁴ This has already led to a drop in the numbers of age-disputed detainees being referred to the **Refugee Council**. However, it is not yet clear if this policy is being universally observed.³⁰

If detained, it is even harder for the young person to access help to challenge their detention. This makes it likely that children are being deported back to countries where there is a high risk of harm.

Accommodation

Children thought to be adults will not be housed in supported accommodation as they should be under children's law. There are serious child protection issues about separated children being housed in other arrangements, for example, if they are placed in shared accommodation with adults.

Total number of separated children arriving each year

There are no official statistics about how many of the 2,425 age-disputed young people are children. Monitoring by the **Refugee Council** found that over 60% of age-disputed individuals detained at Oakington Reception Centre and assessed there by Cambridge Social Services were found to be children.⁴ This is supported by anecdotal evidence from charities.

Assuming the 60% figure is accurate, the age of around 1,455 children was not initially believed in 2005. Added to the 2,965 who are already accepted as children, this puts the total number of children applying that year at closer to 4,500. This in turn means that a third of all children who apply for asylum—1,455 out of around 4,500—are initially treated as adults.

Detention of children in families

One issue that donors may be aware of is the detention of children in families. Around 2,000 children are locked up with their families in immigration centres each year, some for many months at a time.²⁵

'No Place for a Child'

Charities have united in lobbying the government for an end to the detention of children. The **Refugee Council**, **Save the Children** and **Bail for Immigration Detainees** have led the 'No Place for a Child' campaign.

The ambitious and ongoing campaign has involved research into the detention of children, including alternatives to detention based on schemes trialed in Australia and the United States. Suggestions include extending arrangements whereby families are required to attend reporting centres, and providing supervised accommodation within the community.

At the time of writing, the campaign had resulted in 155 MPs signing an Early Day Motion expressing their concern about the detention of children and calling for alternatives to be piloted.

Most of what is known about the impacts of detention on children has come from evidence collated by the charities involved in the campaign.

For example, the number of children thought to be detained each year—2,000—is an estimate made by **Save the Children**.²⁵ The government only produces 'snapshot' statistics on the number of children detained and the length of their detention on a particular day. This lack of transparency is itself a concern.

There are still far fewer families in detention compared with single male asylum seekers—children made up just 6% of all people detained for immigration purposes in 2005.³¹

The use of detention

The government is increasing its use of detention in the asylum process. For some, detention is used to process 'fast-track' cases, whereby families can be detained throughout the time that their application is being considered. It is also used at the end of the process, to assist the enforced removal of those whose claims have been rejected.

Detaining children is in breach of international legislation and guidelines such as the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Being taken into detention

The way that some families are taken into detention is disturbing and unpleasant. They are often removed from home without notice with little explanation of why they are being detained.³² There are cases of children being picked up at the school gates and of dawn raids on family homes. One 13-year-old boy tells of his experiences:

There is no limit on the length of time that a child can be detained for.



Photograph supplied by The Children's Society

Box 10: Children's understanding of detention

The Children's Commissioner for England visited Yarl's Wood Immigration Removal Centre, the main centre for the detention of women and children. He spoke with a number of children:

*'Not one of these children had any clear idea or, in the case of some children, any idea at all, of why they were detained at Yarl's Wood. Neither had the children any knowledge of how long they would be there and what was likely to happen to them. Many had no recollection of their country of origin, having been in the country for five or six years, and in some cases, did not know their parent's state of origin. Indeed one child, when asked where her mother came from, stated quite clearly that she came from London. Many of the children clearly saw themselves as English children.'*³²

There are cases of children being picked up at school gates to be taken into detention, and of dawn raids on family homes.

*'When they came to the house like an earthquake the way they knock. I think there were ten of them spread all around our house ... The way they look at you is like you are a criminal; they had big padded jackets and handcuffs, like police and stuff.'*³³

The decision to detain appears to be arbitrary, does not take into account the welfare of children, and is done for administrative purposes rather than as a last resort.²⁵ Sometimes it happens after the family has been living in the UK for many years (see Box 10).

The impact of detention on health

Michael was detained for seven days with his mother in three separate detention centres when he was seven years old. His mother describes the impact on him:

'After the detention Michael was in a bad way. The bedwetting was a problem again and he had nightmares ... Michael was afraid of the police coming again. He was always afraid. He kept asking questions like "what if they come and you are not in ... will they come and get me at school?" ... Now he is better. It took a long time for him to get better, about a year and a half.'

Detention is an unpleasant and potentially damaging experience for anyone. Children are particularly vulnerable. They are at risk of developing physical problems such as lack of sleep, loss of appetite and respiratory difficulties.²⁵

There is also evidence of children in detention developing mental health problems. These can be due to both the experience of detention itself and the anxiety caused by not knowing what is going to happen to them. There is a risk of 'retraumatisation' if the experience of detention brings back memories of previous disturbing experiences.²⁵ Children's mental health may also be worsened by the effect detention is having on their parents.

The impact of detention on education

Detention has a damaging effect on children's academic and social environment. Children are provided with some education inside the centre, though there is concern about its quality, and the provision for teenagers.²⁵

Disruption to schooling and the environment in which children are educated is even more important.

Safeguards on children in detention

HM Chief Inspector of Prisons Anne Owers is concerned that there is no evidence that children's welfare is taken into account when making decisions about the initial and continued detention of children.³³

In practice, there is currently no limit on the length of time that a child can be detained. Lobbying by charities such as **Bail for Immigration Detainees** has had some success. Children can now no longer be detained for longer than 28 days without the authority of the Immigration Minister. However, this is merely an internal review and has not resulted in the immigration authorities reconsidering the need to detain. There are no known cases where the minister has not authorised continued detention beyond this time limit.²⁵

Detainees often do not have legal representation, and there is a lack of access to such help in detention centres that makes it extremely difficult for detainees to apply for release. **Bail for Immigration Detainees (BID)** is a charity that challenges immigration detention.

BID is able to represent those who are particularly vulnerable at bail hearings, and runs workshops and publishes a 'Notebook on Bail' that helps people take their own cases forward. It costs **BID** just £720 for each person it gets released.

Growing up in the UK

2

Childhood and adolescence are key periods of development. Young refugees and asylum seekers lose many, if not all, of their connections when they flee their country. As a result, they do not have the sources of support and guidance from family and friends that most of us receive when we are growing up. Even those young people who arrive with their family can become disconnected from the wider community. Charities can play a crucial role in developing children's wider social networks and encouraging their integration.

Most separated children will spend at least a year living legally in the UK. During this time, their essential needs are supposed to be met by social services. However, in reality support varies widely between local authorities. Often it only covers the bare essentials.

The experiences of children who arrive with their families will depend on their route through the asylum process, the services that the family is able to access, and the support that the child's carer is able to provide. However, there is often still a gap in terms of emotional support and access to services that charities are able to fill.

There is much more that can be done to ensure that these children and young people are able to develop and flourish. Charities can play an important role in providing them with an extra source of support and guidance. There are many reasons why donors might be interested in supporting these charities. Whatever the merits of their asylum claim, children have rights that should be respected. They could be living here for some time, and leaving adolescents unsupported and marginalised can result in anti-social and possibly criminal behaviour.

This section will begin by looking at the needs and wants of children and young people, and highlight which elements are likely to be lacking in the life of a young refugee, and how charities help in these areas.

What children need

Donors wishing to support children whilst they are living in the UK must decide how they want to help. One possible way of structuring giving is by thinking about children's needs as fitting into a hierarchy.³⁴ The most fundamental and pressing need is for a safe place to live—the bottom of the pyramid in Figure 5. For most children who live in this country—we will

call them 'citizen children'—this is provided unthinkingly by their parents. For young refugees, like citizen children whose parents are unable to care for them, this responsibility falls to the state. However, charities can play an important role here, mainly in lobbying for better provision.

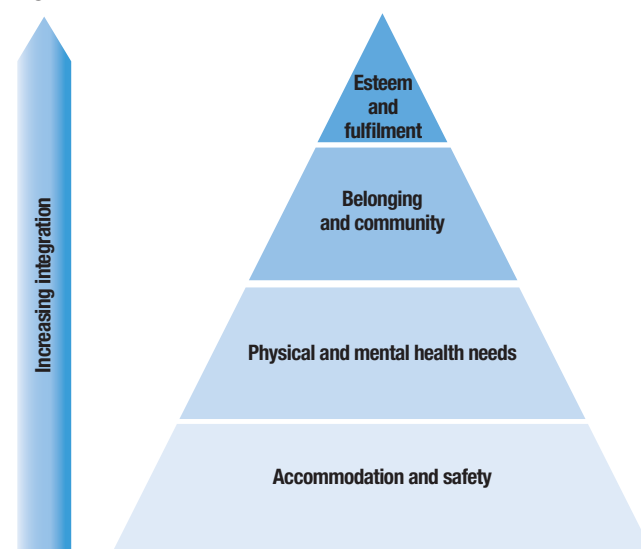
Once accommodation and safety have been addressed, the child's physical and mental health needs must be dealt with. Again, this support is usually given by a child's parents, family and friends. Separated children lack these support networks. Even those who arrive with their families are unlikely to receive all the support they need due to the effect of events on their parents.

A child's acute mental health needs can be addressed yet they may still not feel happy, especially if they are not integrated into their community. Achieving this sense of belonging is the next level in the pyramid. Finally, if all of these physical and mental needs are met, and the young person is given more support and opportunities to flourish, they will be able to increase their self-esteem and lead a more fulfilling life.

This model is simplistic but can help donors identify the different points at which they can intervene. There are many interdependencies, and some things will affect a young person on many levels. For example, going to school can help a child's mental health by giving them a routine and something positive to occupy their mind, and by increasing their social networks. Going to school will also help them to integrate into the community, by offering opportunities to engage with children from the local area.

Most separated children will spend at least a year living legally in the UK. Children in families will be here at least while their claim is being processed, which can take months or years.

Figure 5: Children's needs



When children themselves are asked what they want, they almost always put education as the main priority.

Furthermore, if they are supported and able, they can achieve educational success. This can provide a boost to their confidence and self-esteem.

Preparing for the future

Young refugees and asylum seekers face a great deal of uncertainty about their future. It is important that what happens in the UK prepares them for a fulfilling life, whether or not they are allowed to stay beyond 18.

The importance of providing sensitive and flexible, yet realistic, support is likely to grow in the future as the number of enforced returns increases.

Section 3 will discuss how turning 18 affects the child's status and entitlements.

Children in families

Many of the issues discussed in this section apply to both separated children and those who arrive here with their families. Where there are important differences, these will be highlighted.

The role of charities

A lot of the services discussed, especially those around accommodation, health and education, are the responsibility of the government. However, there is an important need for the work of charities to supplement, monitor and improve these services.

Table 3: Where donors can make a difference

Area of need	Issue	Example of charities and activities
Accommodation and safety	Separated children	Research into the social service care provided to separated children, by charities like Save the Children and the Refugee Council . Lobbying for improvements to services, by individual charities and Refugee Children's Consortium .
	Children in families	Advising people on better housing— Positive Action in Housing .
Physical and mental health needs	Physical health	Training young people to deliver sex education by Albanian Youth Action .
	Mental health	Medical Foundation for the Care of Victims of Torture provides therapy and support for children who have experienced violence and torture.
Belonging and community	Education	The Children's Society OASIS Project works in a school supporting young refugees with their practical problems so they can concentrate on their studies. Children in Vulnerable Accommodation helps young refugees get school places.
	Social networks	Save the Children's Befriending Unaccompanied Minors Project brings together young refugees in Birmingham with young adults from the city.
Esteem and fulfilment	Building confidence and life skills	The Children's Society's New Londoners project encourages young refugees to help organise the project's activities.
	Self-advocacy	Save the Children's Brighter Futures projects give young refugees the skills and opportunities to campaign on the issues that affect them.
	Volunteering	Save the Children's Befriending Unaccompanied Minors Project supports young refugees to become volunteers in the community.
	Community leadership	RefugeeYouth supports young refugees to run their own youth groups.



Needs discussed in the top two segments of the pyramid—‘Esteem and fulfilment’, and ‘Belonging and community’—lie outside the state’s remit. By supporting charities working in this an area, donors can make a real difference. Table 3 gives an overview of these charities, which are discussed in more detail throughout this section. Table 4 in the Conclusions and funding recommendations section provides an overview of the results of their work.

What children want

The pyramid is based on a general model of human development. When refugee children themselves are asked what they want, they almost always list education as their top priority.

Besides education, other needs that children identify are:³⁵

- A good solicitor who gives them clear explanations of their legal situation;
- Caring, loving adults who will help them understand why they are here;
- Adults who keep their details safe, so that they do not have to keep repeating their story;
- Sympathetic health workers who listen and explain carefully;
- Links with refugee community organisations to look for relatives and find ways of contacting home, and to help them maintain links with their culture;
- Teachers who give them extra help to achieve their potential;
- Realistic careers advice, which considers what would be of use back home;
- Learning about British life, including how to counter racism;

- Plenty of activities to keep their minds off their problems and allow them to make friends and achieve something tangible. Younger children who may have missed out on many aspects of their childhood also want to be able to play.

Poverty and isolation

Poverty and isolation can damage young refugees’ mental and physical health, education, integration into the community and general well-being.

The government says it is committed to reducing child poverty. However, despite also claiming that ‘Every Child Matters’, the government’s asylum policies keep thousands of asylum seeking and refugee children in poverty.⁷

The benefits that asylum-seeking families receive are lower than the income support that citizen families can claim, yet they are not allowed to work. Children are allocated the same child benefits as citizen children, but their parents will only receive weekly benefits from NASS which are set at 30% less than Jobseeker’s Allowance. Separated children may get a small allowance around the level of income benefits, depending on the nature of their placement and the local authority. They are entitled to help with other expenses such as travel and school uniform, though they may have problems accessing grants for these. Support can vary greatly between areas.

Struggling to survive on such meagre incomes can cause shocking problems. For example, **The Children’s Society’s OASIS Project** had to help two young African children who arrived at school in the winter without sweatshirts because they could not afford them.

Young asylum seekers face a great deal of uncertainty about their future. It is important that what happens in the UK prepares them for a fulfilling life wherever they end up.

Box 11: Accessing social services care³⁶

One 15-year-old boy arrived at an airport with an agent who disappeared on arrival. The boy waited at the airport all night for the agent to return. Eventually, he asked the police for help. They drove him into the city centre and left him there.

The boy spoke very little English and had only £120. He spent the next five days sleeping rough. Eventually a stranger told him to go to the local authority offices and, after two more nights in the cold, he made it to social services.

Separated children are extremely vulnerable, and UK law recognises this.

The poverty that most asylum-seeking children live in also makes it harder for them to integrate with others and thus worsens their isolation. For example, often they are unable to join in with activities because they cannot afford it.

The long school holidays are a challenge for most families. For separated children, and those living in poverty with their family, they are even more difficult. Charities have an important role in providing activities for children during the holidays. **The Children's Society**, **DOST** at **Trinity Centre** and **Salusbury World** are just a few of the charities doing this.

Children in Vulnerable Accommodation (CHIVA) in Leeds was created based on research into what children want and need. The research identified 'somewhere to play' as a major priority. **CHIVA** employs play workers to increase children's access to fun and creative activities. They help parents and children to think creatively about finding ways to play without having to spend money, as well as providing basic play materials for families. Play workers also work in local 'reception centres' where refugee families are accommodated until they are housed in the community.

Accommodation and safety

When refugees and asylum seekers flee their country, they also lose their homes—the very place where children usually feel safe and secure. Unfortunately, refugees are usually not in a position to provide themselves with

a new home, one of the most fundamental needs of a child refugee. This is a responsibility that falls to the state. The work of charities in this area, from providing individual advocates to researching and lobbying on the issue of housing, is important and worthy of support.

The accommodation situation differs for separated children and those in families, and so each will deal with these separately.

Separated children

Referral to social services

Separated children are extremely vulnerable, and UK law recognises this. As children without an adult who has 'parental responsibility' for them in the country, they count as children 'in need' under the Children Act (1989).³⁶ They should receive a full assessment of their needs by social services. The outcome of this assessment will impose duties on social services to support and accommodate them.

How, why and when they are referred to social services in the first place varies from child to child. For the relatively few children who apply for asylum as soon as they arrive, it is the duty of the immigration officials to inform the local social services department, which will immediately be responsible for assessing their needs and caring for them.

Many of the thousands of children who apply once they have arrived in the UK may have been in touch with social services before they claimed asylum. Two possible scenarios include:

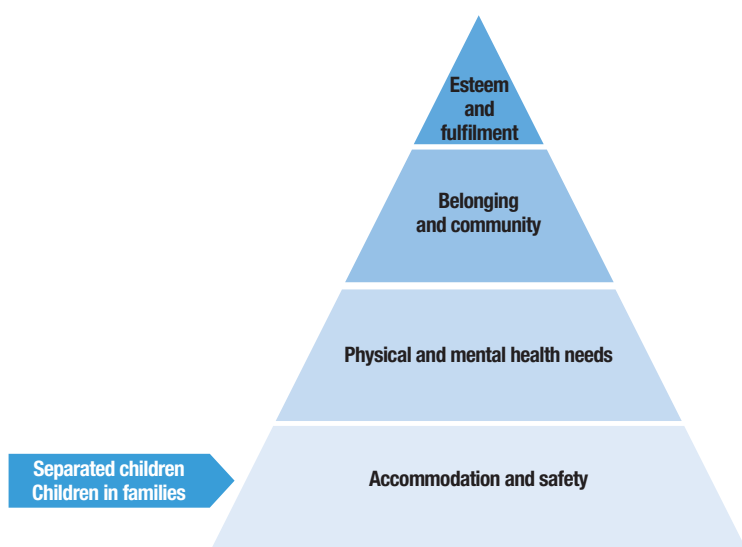
- Many children are brought here by agents. One common scenario is that the agent will make an excuse to leave the young person alone, advising them to ask for help from anybody in a uniform.³⁷
- Children brought in by smugglers might be dumped on a roadside and found by police.³⁸

Others reach social services by a haphazard route, perhaps through refugee community organisations, charities, friends or relatives,³⁹ or kind strangers.³⁶ Box 11 shows one boy's difficult route into social services care.

It is no surprise that some end up being in the country for some time before social services know about them. However, one study showed that 85% had met with social services within one month of being in the country.³⁹

Social services accommodation and support

Save the Children undertook important research in 2001³⁶ that documented the deficiencies in the services many social service departments were providing to young asylum seekers. Provision for males aged 16-17 was particularly inadequate. Often they were left to



cope with very little support and in unsuitable accommodation, such as bed and breakfast lodgings.

It took two years for the Department of Health to issue guidance that made it clear that this was not acceptable, and that young asylum seekers should become fully 'looked after' like British children in the care system, unless other arrangements are better suited—for example, if the young person has a special desire to live more independently.

This duty of care brings with it a wide range of services and support that local authorities should be providing, including:

- Foster care, at least for those under 16;
- Supported accommodation where foster care is not available or suitable;
- An allocated social worker, who creates a personalised care plan;
- Financial support;
- Entitlement to continued support once they turn 18 (see Section 3).

It is not clear that all local authorities are taking this guidance on board. There are still serious concerns about the quality of care that asylum seekers aged 16-17 are receiving and the care provided still varies greatly between social services departments. More recent research from **Save the Children**²⁹ and the **Refugee Council**⁴⁰ found that three out of 18 boroughs were still only providing unsupported accommodation to 16 and 17 year olds and had no plans to change this. However, the research also found that providing such support is expensive, and that local authorities do not receive sufficient funds from central government to provide this level of care.

Foster care

Foster care placements are usually ideal for those under 16, particularly if the family is from a similar cultural background to the young person. Refugee children living in foster care receive a high level of care, and most appreciate the extra support and other benefits of living with a family, such as improving their English.³⁶

Box 12: Being removed from a foster family

A 16-year-old boy from the Democratic Republic of Congo came to the UK when he was 13, following the murder of his father. He was placed with a foster family, where he was happy and had settled in well. When he turned 16, after nearly three years with the family, social services told him that he was going to be moved out of his house into other accommodation because he was an asylum seeker, and they were not receiving enough money to continue paying for foster care.

He contacted the charity **Voice**, which appointed a personal advocate who lodged an official complaint to the social services for him. He has not been moved out of foster care and the local authority is now reviewing its services for young asylum seekers.

Social workers recognise this. However, foster carers are in short supply, especially those from ethnic minorities. This results in some children being placed far away from the department that is responsible for them, with major implications for the social worker's involvement in their life.

This is a particular trend in London⁴¹ and the south east. It has led to the government piloting a 'safe case transfer' model whereby some children being looked after by Kent, but placed in the north of England, were officially handed over to Manchester.

This approach is likely to be expanded following the government's current reform plan. However, there are concerns about whether dispersing children is in their best interest, especially if they have connections to the area they are being dispersed from.

Foster care is even more expensive than supported accommodation. Home Office funding for young asylum seekers drops by half once a child turns 16. Consequently social services find it hard to continue to provide foster care after a child turns 16 (see Box 12). This disrupts their life, changing the relationships they have developed with their foster carer and links with the local area.

The quality and availability of accommodation varies hugely between different authorities.



Photograph supplied by Salisbury World

Box 13: Young asylum seekers expressing their concerns

'We are working on the issue of social services. We are worried about how refugees and asylum-seeking children are treated and getting different levels of support in different London boroughs. For example some of us get support for travel and others don't. Some of us have experienced social workers ignoring our calls when we call them. We believe that all young asylum seekers and refugees should be treated equally. We also believe the support system and our entitlements should be explained to us clearly when we first arrive.'

Save the Children's Brighter Futures London group

25% of separated children in social care have no other support beyond that provided by professionals.

Other supported accommodation

Most young people over 16 are given semi-independent accommodation. This could be a house shared with other asylum-seeking young people, perhaps with a guardian on site, or at least with regular visits from a support worker.

This can work well if they develop relationships with others living with them, and are given sufficient support from the social worker. However, the quality and availability of accommodation varies hugely between different authorities.

Some charities have contracts with local authorities for providing accommodation to young refugees. This is often only a small part of the charity's operations, but means that the young people can benefit from the charity's expertise and other activities.

Rainer is a charity that works with under-supported young people. It began to provide accommodation for young refugees in Lincoln in response to a desperate lack of decent accommodation—there were cases of ten young men living in a one-bedroom local authority flat. **Rainer** provides housing with support that meets the specific needs of young refugees, and employs older refugees as support workers to help younger people deal with their problems.

The charity **Albanian Youth Action (AYA)** runs a house that can accommodate four young people. The accommodation is of a better quality than is usually provided by local authorities, both in terms of the actual quality of the house and the support offered. For example, **AYA** is able to provide Albanian-speaking counsellors and advice, a support worker who visits at least three times a week, and access to all of **AYA**'s other services, such as social events. **AYA** is a small charity, and finds it hard to negotiate contracts

with local authorities. Supporting its work with core funding could help it improve its accommodation services.

Asphaleia Care is a housing company that also runs a charity, **Asphaleia Action**. In conjunction with the local authority, the company developed a house for young refugees and asylum seekers that both suits the needs of the children by being small, friendly and supportive, and is also affordable for the local authority.

Safety

As well as accommodation, protecting children's safety is a fundamental need that donors might be interested in. A recent survey found that 25% of separated children in social care have no other support beyond that provided by professionals, and a further 20% have just one other source of support.³⁹

The social isolation experienced by many separated young people, and their complete dependence on the support provided by social services is worrying in terms of belonging, community and fulfilment (Figure 5). However, the isolation of refugee children, and other looked after children, also raises concerns about child safety. For example, as we have already heard, those over 16 tend to be placed in semi-independent accommodation, with little supervision. This makes it easy for those who are trafficked here to start meeting their trafficker. Even if they have not been trafficked, separated adolescents are at risk of engaging in harmful activities such as drug use, unprotected sex, or of being preyed on by older men.

Donors can increase children's safety by supporting charities that extend the network of support for separated children. Such charities are discussed later in this section.

Separated children living with families

A significant minority of separated children are not accommodated by social services, but instead choose to live with friends or family.³⁹ These are children who are asylum seekers in their own right, and are still the responsibility of social services, even though they do not need to be accommodated.

Such arrangements can work well, as they can provide the child with a stable and supportive family environment. However, there

are concerns about the risk of exploitation in such situations, as social services do not have a strong duty to monitor these placements. There is a tendency for social workers to reduce their support if a child appears not to be in immediate need.

On top of this, there may be children living in private fostering arrangements who are not social services.

Improving social service care for separated children

Asylum-seeking children generally receive care of a lower quality than looked after citizen children.³⁹ This is perpetuated by the government's limited funding for refugee children and negative attitudes to these children within some departments.

This variation and deficiencies in care creates a clear role for charities to challenge cases of insufficient care, and help children access appropriate services.

Save the Children runs the **Brighter Futures** groups, where young asylum seekers and refugees get together to campaign about the issues that affect them. The London group is campaigning for better social service care (see Box 13). They have held meetings with social workers to discuss their concerns, and have created a leaflet describing their experiences of going through the asylum process, which will be given to new arrivals to help them understand the system.

The advocacy charity, **Voice**, helps children in care who are having difficulties, and employs a specialist advocate for separated asylum-seeking children (Box 12). It is able to work with the child to try and resolve their issues, which range from problems getting clothing allowances to incidents of sexual abuse.

Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children Reform Programme

The government is currently reviewing its policy on unaccompanied refugee children. It is not clear what the outcome will be, though it seems that it will involve placing the responsibility of caring for these children in the hands of only certain contracted local authorities, probably away from London and the south east. This may lead to problems in access to legal representation, cultural isolation of children from minority ethnic backgrounds

and pressures on other essential local services, such as education and mental health. Access to specialist services may be reduced, such as those currently provided in London by the **Medical Foundation** (whose work is discussed later in the mental health section).

The **Refugee Children's Consortium**, a lobbying group formed of many charities working with refugee children, is keeping a close eye on policy developments to push for changes that will improve the treatment of these children.

Children in families

It is usually the parents' role to look after a child's needs—to house, clothe and feed them. However, refugee families often arrive destitute, and unable to provide these basic necessities for their children.

The National Asylum Support Service (NASS) is in charge of housing destitute families whilst their claims are being processed. Since 2000, families needing accommodation have been dispersed to areas outside London and the south east, in order to reduce pressure on the housing stock.

Housing provided to asylum seekers can be of very poor quality.⁸ Families often live in cramped conditions in the cheapest housing that the local authority can find. Those who choose not to be housed by NASS often share houses with friends and family, so also live in cramped conditions. Asylum seekers and refugees often have to move house many times.

Positive Action in Housing works in Glasgow providing advice to refugees and asylum seekers about their housing options. Homelessness, overcrowding, racial harassment and housing-related health issues are the most common problems that arise. It costs just £170 to advise a client on their housing options.

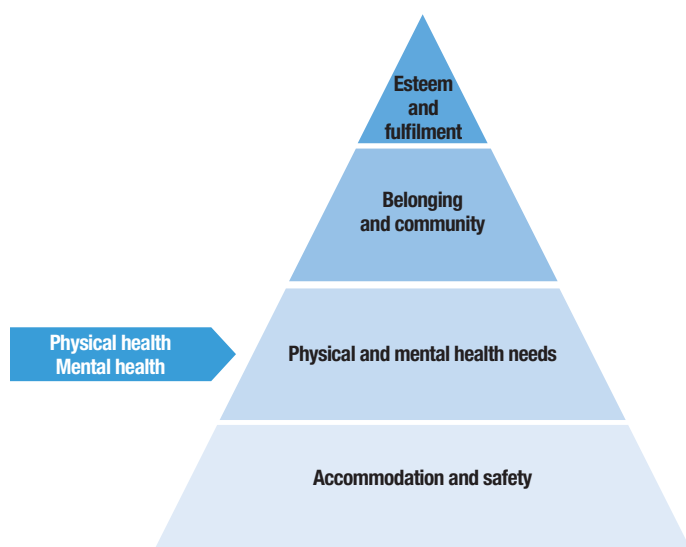
Positive Action in Housing helps 250 people a year into better housing.

Detention

When children are detained, they are clearly not in safe, supportive accommodation, as described in Section 1. This has a damaging effect on a child's development: their health, their education, and their self-esteem.

Housing provided to asylum seekers can be of very poor quality. Positive Action in Housing advises refugees and asylum seekers in Glasgow on their housing options, helping them obtain better housing.

Physical and mental health



Another factor that donors might be concerned about is children's health needs. Again, most responsibilities in this area fall to the state. However, charities have an important role to play in helping children to access these services, and providing support where this is not available.

Physical health

Health needs of refugee children

On average, refugee children have greater health needs than British-born children. This is for several reasons, including:³⁹

- They may have come from areas where diseases such as TB, malaria or HIV/AIDS are common. They may not have had their conditions diagnosed and treated. They may not have received the normal immunisations, because of lack of healthcare or the disruption of healthcare systems due to conflict.
- Those who have experienced violence might have particular injuries, such as fractures, wounds caused by firearms, or difficulties with eyesight or hearing caused by beatings.
- Long arduous journeys can result in children being thin, tired and malnourished.
- Girls from some countries may have undergone genital mutilation, which can have severe effects on their mental and physical health.

Many young people arrive with acute physical health needs. However, their health needs can also deteriorate once they are here, due to living in poor quality accommodation, isolation, or the stress of dealing with their asylum claim.⁴²

Barriers to healthcare

Asylum-seeking children have the same right to healthcare as other children. For separated children, it is the social worker's responsibility to complete an assessment of their needs, and make sure that they are registered with GPs. For children in families, it is up to the parents to do this, helped by agencies such as housing associations.

Refugee children may find it difficult to access suitable healthcare in the first place, particularly if they do not understand their rights and needs. They are from countries that are very different from the UK. The healthcare system here may be very confusing to outsiders. There are also cultural and linguistic issues that need to be addressed sensitively by professionals.

Sex education

Many separated children arrive here in their late adolescence, in a country that is probably more open about sexuality than their home country. They are often left with little structure in their lives, and do not have family to support and care for them. It is hardly surprising that they often become involved in relationships that may become sexual.⁴³

Charities and health workers have expressed concern about a lack of awareness among child refugees about contraception and sexual health issues. There are high levels of teenage pregnancy and sexual health problems amongst some groups.⁴² Sexual health education is unlikely to have taken place in the child's home country, and in the UK this happens in mainstream classes, and only until children are 16. As will be shown later, refugee children struggle to get mainstream places in school, and many arrive when they are already 16, so they miss out on formal sexual health education.

Charities can play an important role by discussing sexual health issues. Peer education is a particularly effective way of spreading messages about such a personal topic. **Albanian Youth Action** trained five young refugees to teach others about sexual health issues. They ran workshops for over 450 young people. **RefugeeYouth**, a network of refugee youth groups, is working with **Brook Advisory Centres** to discuss with the young leaders of the groups how to talk about sexual health issues with their peers.

On top of problems arising from behaviour in the UK, some children having been raped as part of the violence in their home countries. This issue is often not adequately addressed by social services.⁴⁴ **DOST** at **Trinity Centre** has had to help girls who had experienced sexual violence in their country of origin and were not offered HIV tests. It did this both by accessing tests and providing counselling.

Albanian Youth Action trained five young refugees to teach others about sexual health issues. They ran workshops for over 450 young people.

National Children's Bureau runs a network for professionals about children living with HIV, and is piloting a project looking at the specific needs of refugee and immigrant children. This is the first project of its kind focusing on this area, and will lead to increased knowledge about the scale of the problem.

Diet and exercise



Photograph supplied by Albanian Youth Action

'Sometimes when I am short of money, I just eat mayonnaise!'

17-year-old asylum seeker³⁶

There are many reasons that make it likely that separated children do not eat healthy diets. Those who are over 16 are likely to be in accommodation where they have to fend for themselves in the kitchen. Like many 16 year olds, they are unlikely to be the best cooks in the world. They have little money to spend on food and what is available here may be very different to food in their home country.

Some charities that run social activities also run an important 'life skills' element, which includes cooking. For example, the **Refugee Arrivals Project** has a weekly social evening at a multicultural centre in west London for separated young people, including those whose age is being disputed. Each week the staff get two of the young people to help them shop and prepare the food for everyone.

Albanian Youth Action encourages healthy eating at the same time as engaging young people with their heritage by printing recipes for Albanian food on its website.

Save the Children's Befriending Unaccompanied Minors Project (BUMP) runs a social evening that combines social activities with teaching life skills. As well as encouraging cooking, **BUMP** also helps young people to get exercise, which is important as

Box 14: Charities providing holistic support to children and families

Mira came to the UK from Kosovo in 2001 when she was 15. Her mother had post-traumatic stress disorder and Mira had taken on a parental role within the family. **Haven Project**, a charity in Hull, helped Mira's mother find specialist mental health support and arranged for a young befriender to spend time with the children.

Haven helped Mira get into a very good sixth form college, which did wonders for her mental health. Her younger sister wanted to learn to play the violin, so the worker organised free lessons, which helped her cope with the family's troubles.

Haven also supported the family when it was in crisis after their asylum claim was refused and Mira took an overdose. She has now recovered and the family has leave to remain in this country. Although Mira spoke little English on arrival, she is now studying English at Cambridge University.

those aged 16-17 are unlikely to be getting compulsory physical education as part of their college course. It runs activities every other weekend, including physical activities such as swimming and cycling. As well as giving young people the opportunity to exercise there and then, it introduces them to the facilities available in the local area.

Nutrition is also a worry for children who arrive here with their families. Adult asylum seekers receive less financial support from NASS than families on income benefit. This makes it difficult to provide for the family, especially if children have problems eating the unfamiliar foods they are given at school.⁴¹

Mental health

Why children might have mental health problems

Refugee children may have been through experiences that most of us could not even imagine. The kind of things that cause people to flee their homes—war, torture, violence, loss—can also cause serious disturbances to people's mental health.⁴⁵

This impact may be compounded by the confusion and disorientation of their early post-arrival experiences.³⁹ Once they arrive, they are 'strangers in a strange land', having to deal with a difficult cultural transition. On top of this, they must negotiate their way through a maze of services.⁴⁶ Their life is partly in the hands of social workers and the Home Office, which may refuse their asylum claim and decide to detain or remove them when they turn 18.

Refugee children are often very isolated, and may experience discrimination and racism. As we have already seen above, one quarter of separated children have no external support other than from their social worker.³⁹ Loneliness and isolation can worsen existing emotional problems, or cause new ones.

Up to 40 % of refugee children are thought to have psychiatric and psychological problems such as post-traumatic stress disorder and depression.

It is not just what happened in their home country that affects children's mental health. What happens here is also a contributing factor.

Improving mental health

Up to 40% of refugee children are thought to have psychiatric and psychological problems such as post-traumatic stress disorder and depression.⁴⁵ This is the extreme end of the scale. Other children may suffer from anxiety and emotional problems related to their isolation.

School is often the first place where a child's mental health needs are recognised,⁴¹ although the experience of going to school can itself improve mental health, as discussed later in this section. Teachers spend a lot of time with the children, and can notice behavioural problems that might indicate mental health issues, such as withdrawal and aggression. Social workers should also pick up on a child's problems in their initial assessment and ongoing involvement.

For those with acute problems, teachers are able to refer pupils on to specialist child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS). However, mainstream CAMHS teams are not always best placed to deal with the needs of these children. They are used to dealing with children with serious chronic conditions such as psychosis. Refugee children in the majority of cases do not have an abnormal psychiatric condition. They are experiencing a perfectly normal response to extraordinary circumstances.⁴²



Photograph supplied by Medical Foundation for the Care of Victims of Torture

Furthermore, one of the important issues for these children is that many of the things that we take for granted and understand are very new and different to what they are used to. Attitudes to mental health problems vary widely between cultures, and traditional Western responses to mental illness may not be appropriate for children from different backgrounds.

Schools and social workers may also refer children to the **Medical Foundation for the Care of Victims of Torture**, which has a specialist team for refugee children.

The **Medical Foundation** is able to take a broad approach considering all of a child's needs and circumstances. It has a range of treatments, such as individual intensive therapy, group therapy, and art and music therapies that can help a child express their feelings and start to deal with them. It can work with a child for a long time, sometimes two to five years, which may be necessary when a child's experiences here are unstable.

Problems accessing services

There are many reasons why refugee children with mental and emotional health problems may not get the support they need.

If they are not at school, or they are only in post-16 education without much pastoral support, their problems may go unnoticed if it is left to the social workers or parents.

Resource-stretched social workers may not be able to spend enough time with a child to correctly identify issues, especially if there are language and cultural barriers. This is particularly the case for those living in semi-independent accommodation. This is worrying because these are also the children who are least likely to have good supportive social networks.³⁹

Parents may be unaware of the child's distress, particularly if they are distracted by their own emotional problems.⁴⁵ Due to cultural differences, they might have a very different understanding of psychological problems and of the appropriate responses, or they may not be aware of the services available and how to access them.

Resilience and the need for non-psychiatric support

Though it is undoubtedly true that refugee children are highly likely to experience mental health issues, it is not useful to label all these children as 'traumatised'. This does not help their recovery as it encourages a focus on a narrow definition of their mental health, ignoring other factors that may also contribute to their distress, such as their loneliness.¹

Moreover, it is a view that undermines the resourcefulness and strength of these young people.

It is helpful to talk in terms of 'resilience', and what is needed to improve this, rather than focusing on trauma. Not all these children are suffering from extreme post-traumatic stress requiring psychiatric support. There are other less intensive approaches that can have great impact on children's mental health and resilience.

It is important to remember that it is not just what happened in their home country that affects children's mental health. What happens here is also a contributing factor. If children

experience isolation, a lack of structure, have little involvement with their peers and often have poor experiences of school, their mental health can deteriorate. Therefore anything that improves these background factors, which will be discussed in the next section, will improve their emotional well-being and their ability to cope with change.

School is a familiar and unthreatening environment, and therefore a good place to help children begin to deal with their problems and anxieties. The **Medical Foundation** runs a school support group, as does **Haven Project** (see Box 14) in Hull, and **The Children's Society's Harbour Project** in Oxford.

The **Place2Be** provides emotional and therapeutic support to children in primary schools. The charity provides individual support (see Box 15), and has set up a group in a school in Brent in north London, for 'children who have had to move from another country'. Children in the small group are able to tell their stories through art and role play. By re-enacting cruelty, civil war and imprisonment in the safe environment of the group, the children build up a shared experience and learn to trust each other.

Southfields Community College, a school in south London where nearly one in four students is from a refugee background and 71 languages are spoken, has taken the initiative to set up its own support group for children with post-traumatic stress disorder run by a member of staff who is a qualified counsellor.

Supporting parents

The presence and quality of parenting is one of the most important factors influencing the psychological vulnerability of refugee children.¹ Children in families may be protected from developing problems because of the 'buffering' effect of the continuing presence of their parents throughout their experiences.

On the other hand, if the parents are themselves traumatised, children may suffer further. They may need to take on additional responsibilities such as representing the adult through the asylum process and caring for them.⁴⁶ The stress that parents are going through is likely to affect their children. Any policy intervention that places greater stress on refugee parents—such as forcing them into extreme poverty—may render a child less likely to cope.¹

NPC's report, *Home truths*, discusses many of the stresses that adult refugees have to cope with. As well as living on very low levels of benefit, they often receive little emotional support, are very isolated, suffer racial harassment, and live in fear of being rejected, detained and deported.

Box 15: Supporting children in schools

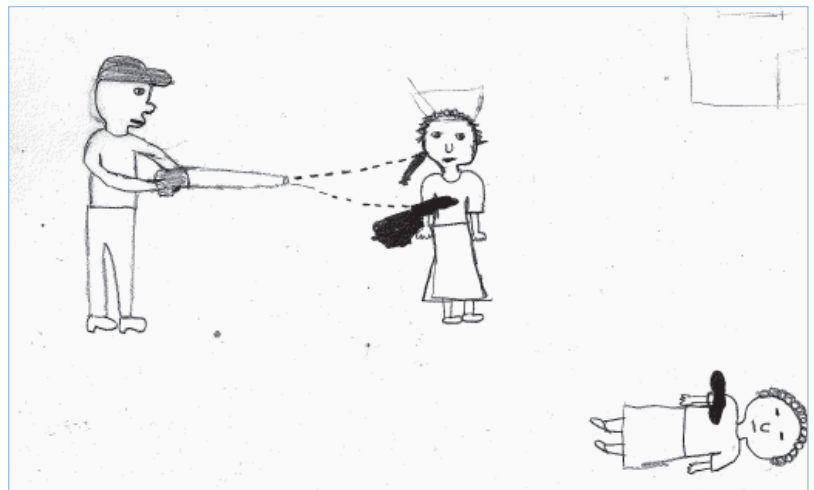
Adi was seven when he was referred to **The Place2Be** because of his attention-seeking behaviour in the classroom.

Through therapeutic play with his counsellor, it became apparent that Adi was preoccupied with the many losses he had experienced in his life. With his counsellor, he explored disturbing themes of abandonment and isolation, and of people drowning in his home country of Sierra Leone.

Helping Adi to address serious underlying issues had a significant impact. As a result, he began to engage much more actively in the classroom.

Supporting refugee parents is an important part of helping children. For example, the **Medical Foundation for the Care of Victims of Torture** provides therapy and support for those who have experienced torture and are suffering health problems as a result.

Bradford Action for Refugees runs a weekly drop-in centre for families. This gives parents and their children a chance to relax and socialise. This reduces isolation and builds parents' support networks.



These drawings are by two sisters from Angola who were receiving treatment with a child psychologist at the Medical Foundation for the Care of Victims of Torture. They had witnessed their parents being killed.

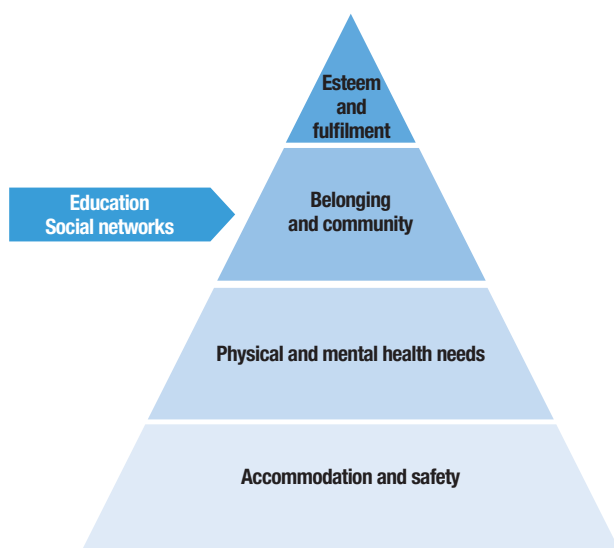
There are huge gaps between the benefits education can bring to child refugees and what they actually receive.

Salusbury World is based in a primary school in north London with high numbers of children from refugee backgrounds. It was set up by a head teacher who realised that the refugee children and families in the school were missing out on the social and educational opportunities that the other children enjoyed. As well as providing activities for the children, the charity works hard to help their parents—four out of five of the children come from families with neither parent in employment. They provide support and advice for parents, with an emphasis on empowerment and teaching them how to deal with issues themselves. They also run coffee mornings so that the parents can build relationships and support each other. Some parents get very involved with the charity, and volunteer their services and run the coffee mornings. **Salusbury World** is developing a new programme that will move on from building the confidence and social networks of the parents, and help them integrate into their community and find jobs.

Parents may also be supported by a refugee community organisation (RCO), locally-based charities catering to the needs of refugees and asylum seekers—70% of all refugees and asylum seekers are connected with an RCO, and there are over 400 of these organisations in London alone.⁸ They vary from small start-ups to professional charities. The **Evelyn Oldfield Unit** provides consultancy and training to RCOs to strengthen their work and thus their impact on the people they work with.

NPC's report, *Home truths*, highlights many more charities focused on supporting adult refugees that donors may be interested in supporting.

Belonging and community



Specialist mental health support is just one component in the support needed to make children happier and better able to cope with their experiences. What happens at a social and community level also plays a crucial role in improving and protecting young people's well-being. Research has shown that the following elements are important:³⁹

- Providing young people with a stable and positive home environment;
- Encouraging and supporting young people to pursue education; and
- Strengthening their social networks.

The first point has already been discussed. There is a clear role for donors in supporting the last two elements, which will be discussed below.

Education

As we have already seen, when refugee children are asked what is important to them, education almost always comes out as the top priority.⁴⁷ Education provides a welcome break from the stresses and uncertainties of the asylum process. It gives structure and routine to lives that are often empty of distractions, and provides hope and security. The quote in Box 16 shows the enthusiasm of one Kurdish student to get back into school after years of disruption.

Educational attainment contributes to developing self-esteem and leading a fulfilled life. But school is also the way that children are anchored into their community, and where they are first able to feel like they belong.

It is the main way that refugee children make friends with children from the local community. A supportive school environment therefore encourages integration by creating strong links between pupils from different backgrounds.

There are huge gaps between the benefits education can bring to child refugees and what they actually receive. This represents a missed opportunity for many of these children.

Learning English

*'If you don't know the language, everything is difficult. I mean, who is going to be your friend if they know you don't understand what they are saying?'*⁴⁸

It is hard to overstate the importance of learning English.

Mainstream school is the best place to do this, not just because of the presence of formal teaching, but also due to the opportunities to learn socially by speaking to other young people.



Photograph supplied by DOST at Trinity Centre

Young refugees and asylum seekers should receive some English language support, either in separate classes or through an English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) support teacher working with them in mainstream lessons. Provision varies between schools. However, most children pick up conversational English very quickly through their friends at school.

The speed with which children learn English is affected by their previous education experience.¹ Those with less prior education, likely to be those from least developed countries or countries with ongoing conflicts, make slower progress.

Donors may be interested in supporting charities that help children to learn English, which in turn helps them to integrate into the community.

Children in Vulnerable Accommodation (CHIVA) piloted an eight-week summer ESOL course for a small group of refugee teenagers. It was aimed at those with little educational experience in the UK, to acclimatise them to a classroom setting and build their confidence. This prepared them for mainstream education in a realistic but supportive environment.

The Children's Society's OASIS Project provides one-to-one literacy support through volunteers and project workers, which improves children's confidence and progress.

Problems accessing education

It is often said that refugee and immigrant children are quick to grasp the importance of education. In many cases, they appreciate education better than citizen children, who may take it for granted. This is backed up by

schools' experiences.⁵⁰ However, due to many barriers, commitment does not necessarily result in higher levels of attainment.

The main hurdle is getting a place in a school in the first place. Schools usually admit new pupils at the beginning of each year in September. Refugees on the other hand arrive all year round. Some schools and colleges are reluctant to admit refugee pupils, particularly those aged 16-17 whose leave may run out before the course finishes.

The **Refugee Council** estimated in 2001 that there were at least 2,100 asylum-seeking and refugee children out of school in Greater London alone.⁵¹

New arrivals to an area often have to wait many months—or even up to a year⁵²—before being found a place in a mainstream school, due to a shortage of places. Children who arrive at an age when they would be expected to take GCSEs face particular difficulties.

New arrivals often have to wait many months—or even a year—before being found a place in a mainstream school. Charities can provide activities for those out of school, and push to get school places them.

Box 16: A Kurdish refugee student's experience of education, part 1⁴⁹

'I was so enthusiastic about starting school and learning English. I had been away from school for two years because we were travelling and did not have a permanent place to live. I promised myself not to miss school again and not to waste more time. I had to be serious and work hard, there was no time for being lazy. Ten days after my arrival I started going to a school close to my house.'

The problem was at my age I should have been doing A-levels, but because I didn't speak English they put me in Year Ten with students who were three years younger than me. The teachers didn't believe I would be able to do GCSEs with so little English. I was told that the best thing for me was to stay in Year Ten until my English was better and maybe in two years I could attempt some GCSEs.'

Refugee children end up in whichever schools have spare places. These schools tend to be less attractive to local children, and may be less successful schools with poor reputations.

Children who are delayed in accessing mainstream education will not reach their full potential, even if they have good prior experiences of education.⁵³

CHIVA is a project in Leeds that works with children likely to miss out on mainstream services, including refugee children and children living in homelessness units. It provides education support to recently arrived refugee children to help them get access to schools and colleges. It often encounters educational discrimination, particularly against those over 16 with little English. Because most separated children only have legal status until they are 18, colleges and schools are unwilling to accept young people onto courses, despite failed asylum seekers being allowed to continue with their education beyond this age. **CHIVA** can help young people overcome these barriers and find school places. It also provides background information on the refugees to the schools, so that they can understand their needs better.

Filling the gap

Being in school has great benefits that young refugees and asylum seekers are missing out on. It is disheartening for children to feel like they are being excluded, rejected and treated differently. Charities provide activities that replicate, or at least go some way to fill

constantly changing group. The young people love the classes, which reduce their isolation and improve their confidence. However, there are only two classes a week. It costs around £20,000 a year to run these classes, which are attended by over 60 children a year who would otherwise have nothing to do. With extra funding, **Voices** could extend this provision.

DOST at **Trinity Centre** in east London runs full-time education programmes for refugee children without a school place. The curriculum covers subjects such as English and IT, but also raises awareness of wider issues such as bullying and sexual health. **DOST's** programme provides somewhere these young people can feel safe and supported and is hugely important to the 85 young people it works with each year. The programme also prepares the children for school, so that they can get the most out of their education.

Asphaleia Action provides immediate access to education for some young asylum seekers in West Sussex, including classes on life skills and cultural adaptation.

Oval House Theatre has begun a similar project in another area of south London, learning from the work in Greenwich. It provides creative classes for children who are not in education through its 'Living Here' project.

Such projects are not a real replacement for mainstream schooling and do not provide a long-term solution. However, they are of great value for the children and young people who use them, when there is no other option.

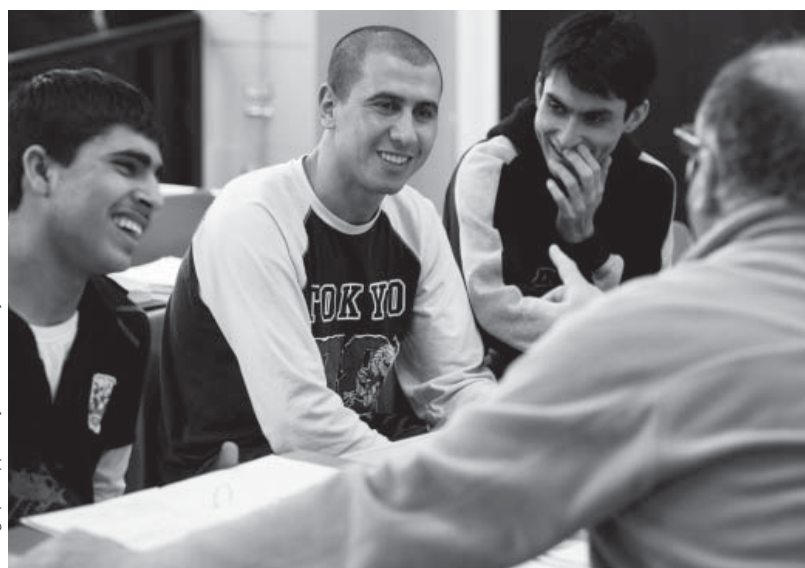
Children in schools and colleges

Refugee children end up in whichever schools have spare places. These schools tend to be less attractive to local children, and may be less successful schools with poor reputations.⁴⁹

On the other hand, schools that are more experienced with immigrant pupils are likely to have developed good practices to welcome and support them. Refugee children are also less likely to encounter problems with racism and bullying where they do not 'stick out' as much.⁵⁰

However, such schools are likely to be under-resourced and stretched. Schools in England can obtain funding for extra support for refugee pupils from local authorities, but it is up to them how they use it. Most schools will employ specialist teachers to form an ESOL or Ethnic Minority Achievement team, though some choose to pool the money with other schools and have a central team based at the local authority.

It is important that teachers are supported and educated about the needs of refugee children. Individual refugee students, like individual non-refugee students, may have particular



Photograph supplied by DOST at Trinity Centre

in for, these benefits. An important result of this is that young people are kept busy and are less isolated. This can reduce the risk of them engaging in anti-social or even criminal behaviour.

Greenwich and Lewisham Young People's Theatre runs a project for young refugees and asylum seekers, called **Voices**. Twice a week, **Voices** runs creative arts and drama classes for new arrivals to the area who do not have a school place. The classes are designed to work with different levels of English, and with a

learning and educational needs.⁴⁹ However, most teachers recognise that refugees also bring an enriching range of opportunities and perspectives.

Salusbury World published a resource pack with **Save the Children** called *Home from home*, about the inclusion of refugee children and families in schools. This was particularly needed in dispersal areas where very few refugee families had previously lived. The best-selling publication has become the definitive text about the issue.

Teachers need support to create a welcoming and inclusive atmosphere, and to encourage understanding of the issues asylum seekers face. **The Children's Society's OASIS Project** has produced a booklet of information for teachers about the countries that refugees come from, including information about educational norms in those countries.

Refugee children arrive at school after much upheaval in their lives. It is important that they are welcomed and given a good induction so that they can settle down as quickly as possible. **Bradford Action for Refugees** has worked with refugee pupils from a local school to develop a 'welcome pack', which will be used for all new pupils, not just refugees. By involving refugee children in writing it—'designing for the margins'—they are ensuring that it is inclusive and deals with any new pupil's questions and worries.

The National Refugee Integration Forum, a governmental organisation, has a website full of information and best practice about refugee children and education.

Educational attainment

Refugee children are often very engaged and motivated pupils, especially when compared with 'looked after' children. They seem to realise that they are lucky to be receiving a free education, and understand that learning is important to succeeding in life. Their experiences of flight, together perhaps with the guilt of survival, can make them determined to succeed.

However, studies of Congolese, Turkish and Somali refugee children indicate underachievement. Just 23% of Somali children secured five grade A*–Cs at GCSE compared with 51% of all children in England.¹

Many barriers can prevent them from achieving their full potential once they find a school place. Some relate to their previous experiences, and others are created by what happens once they arrive.

Children's previous experiences can heavily influence their performance in the classroom. As discussed in the previous section, mental health problems due to previous trauma and current anxieties can stop a child

Box 17: A Kurdish refugee student's experience of education, part 2⁴⁹

'I was shocked to find out that in the lunch queue they used to laugh at me and say that I never had decent food in my country. They said I had always been hungry and that's why I ran away from my home. Some people treated me like a fool because I couldn't speak English well, some just ignored me as if I didn't exist.'

'Nobody wanted to sit next to me in lessons and no one wanted to have me as their partner in PE. I was all alone in the corner. I did not understand the jokes during the lessons. I couldn't understand the subjects we studied because of my English and could never express myself during any simple discussion. I was too scared to talk because I knew if I made a mistake some of them would laugh at me. Once I even got beaten up by a group of students who used to bully everyone. They beat me up one evening when I was walking home alone. They said they couldn't stand me because I was a refugee who lived on the government's money (which they considered to be their own money). After this I lost all my confidence.'

'I almost gave up. The reason I didn't was because of my mother's help and the support I got from my teachers and a school charity.'

With this support, the student eventually went on to university.

from engaging with schoolwork and cause difficulties for their teachers. Teachers at Salusbury Primary School notice that those children attending **Salusbury World's** after-school club for refugee children become more engaged in the classroom, which makes them better placed to succeed in their studies.

Prior educational experience may be very limited, disrupted or even non-existent, due to the countries and situations refugees come from. This can cause difficulties when adapting to the British educational system, and poses problems for teachers having to assess their ability and choose appropriate courses and teaching methods. Poor initial assessment can, for example, lead to children being inappropriately labelled as having special needs or as having acute mental health problems when they do not, or simply being pitched at the wrong level, like the Kurdish boy in Box 16 and 17.

CHIVA employs an educational worker who spends time assessing recently arrived refugee children's needs and liaising with schools and colleges to provide them with a better understanding of the child's educational background. The idea is that teachers are better informed about the new pupils' needs, and are better placed to support them.

Parental support is proven to be a key determinant of a child's educational attainment, and children from families under stress are amongst those most at risk of exclusion.⁵⁴ Separated children lack this support entirely. Those who arrive with their parents may not fare any better, given that 70% of adult refugees speak little or no English¹ so will be unable to provide the hands-on help that many citizen children benefit from.

Somali Women Support and Development

Group is a small refugee community organisation in west London. It provides

Teachers at Salusbury Primary School notice that those children attending Salusbury World's after-school club for refugee children become more engaged in the classroom, which makes them better placed to succeed in their studies.

Separated children are dealing with many adult problems whilst trying to get on with their studies. It is important that they are given support for these other worries. The Children's Society's OASIS Project supports children with their practical problems within the school setting.

support to parents and families. One of its key activities is running a supplementary school for children and teenagers at the weekends, where they can receive extra teaching in Maths and IT.

Separated children are dealing with many adult problems whilst trying to get on with their studies. It is important that they are given support for these other worries. **The Children's Society's OASIS Project** is based in Oxford, the city with the highest number of separated children outside London and the Home Counties. It has a worker based in a school with a high number of young asylum seekers, who helps them with their practical problems such as housing, immigration and health. This leaves them less distracted and better able to concentrate on their studies.

The effect of bullying will be discussed below in terms of its emotional effect. However, it is important to note that bullying and isolation also impacts on children's educational attainment, and is implicated in many cases of truancy and exclusion.⁵⁴ For more information on the causes of truancy and what charities can do to help, see NPC's report, *School's out?*

Immigration policy

There are other external factors that also affect a child's educational progress. Some of these are to do with government policy, and some can be improved by supporting charities working in the field.

Refugees being supported by the state, particularly families being supported by NASS, are often living in temporary accommodation and are forced to move homes many times. This often means children changing schools much more frequently than citizen children. One student was moved five times in one year.⁵⁵ Upheaval has a damaging effect on children's well-being as it once more rips them from their communities. The discontinuity also affects their school experience, and is likely to set back their educational development.¹

Poverty and bad housing, two common characteristics of a refugee's life, also impact on children's educational progression.¹

Separated children are dealing with many adult problems whilst trying to get on with their studies. It is important that they are given support for these other worries. **The Children's Society's OASIS Project** supports children with their practical problems within the school setting. Other advocacy projects, such as **The Children's Society's New Londoners** project in Newham, **Trinity Centre** and **Albanian Youth Action** all help children with their problems, giving them greater peace of mind and making them better able to cope with their schoolwork.

Research into the characteristics of families with high-achieving children shows that those who feel they have control over their lives are likely to have children who succeed at school.¹ Given the asylum decision-making process, and the way refugees are cared for, refugee families are unlikely to fit this description.

Many of the factors that affect children's educational experience are therefore directly related to government policy. Anything that increases poverty, leads to constant changes in schooling and increased anxiety will reduce a child's chances of succeeding at school. This is contrary to the government's Every Child Matters strategy, which places great emphasis on education.

Integration with other pupils

As has been emphasised, school is important not just for education's sake. Children spend most of their days at school. It is where they learn about other people, form friendships and grasp cultural and community norms and values. For refugee children, who have lost their links with their family, friends and community, school is the ideal place to rebuild their sense of self in a stable and supportive environment.

However, refugee children often experience bullying and harassment within schools and their communities. One study of 32 refugee children found that 19 of them had experienced racial harassment.¹

Government policies that victimise asylum seekers and refugees, and misinformed media stories that perpetuate harmful prejudices, influence the treatment of asylum seekers in their communities. Racism, discrimination and even violence against asylum seekers are commonplace in some areas.⁸

Some bullying is the result of other children having an inaccurate understanding of asylum seekers, as the following quotes from children demonstrate:¹

- *'It's true, miss, asylum seekers eat donkeys, it was in the Sun.'*
- *'When an asylum seeker wants housing they get it straight away, they get new furniture and everything. The council pays for new mosques, they pay for everything.'*

The media plays a key role in perpetuating opinions that lead to mistreatment of asylum seekers, which feed into children's attitudes directly and through siblings and parents.

Information Centre about Asylum and Refugees (ICAR) works to increase understanding about asylum within the media and the general population by focusing on the facts, so that public opinion and policy can be

based on evidence rather than prejudice. This may help to reduce bad feeling towards asylum seekers, and therefore reduce bullying.

Teachers and other professionals working in schools have an important role to play in countering such negative attitudes and encouraging understanding of refugee issues. This can be done through the curriculum, for example, in citizenship lessons when discussing human rights.

Bradford Action for Refugees runs regular myth-busting workshops in local primary schools, fighting people's misconceptions about asylum seekers and refugees.

Heads Together runs a community radio station from a school in east Leeds, which airs programmes about refugees. These both raise awareness of the issues and bring together refugees and members of the local community.

Save the Children's Brighter Futures group of young refugees based in Middlesbrough is campaigning against racism in schools and the community. Following a campaign bringing the problem to the attention of local authorities, one school invited the group to train its 70 staff about issues related to racist bullying and refugees.

However, bullying does not just arise out of these young people's status as asylum seekers or refugees. It may result from their race or religion, which is a more general problem.⁵⁶ Such issues are less likely to arise in schools that already have a high ethnic minority population.⁵⁰

Isolation and poverty are other apparent triggers of some bullying behaviour. For example, refugee pupils are often not part of established friendship groups due to their mobility and lack of English. There are cases of refugee children being bullied for not being able to afford the 'right' clothes:¹

'When England were playing in the European Cup, everyone was wearing England shirts. I begged my mum to buy me one. I kept asking her. She said they cost £25 and she could not afford it. In the end she got me a cheap England shirt from the market. I wore it to school and I was very proud. But they knew it was not a real England shirt and they kept calling me "Oxfam" and "beggar boy". I did not wear the shirt again but I dare not tell my mum.'

Bullying of asylum seekers is worst in schools where peer relationships are weak and violence is common.¹ This again demonstrates that there is not a simple relationship between having asylum-seeking pupils in a school and bullying. There are other complicated motivational factors at work. Charities such as **beatbullying** work to change attitudes to bullying through activities within schools and

Box 18: Isolation and segregation—one young refugee's experience⁴⁸

'I am not feeling comfortable, but I have no solution for that. You have to just keep on, you have to just persevere and learn the situation. You have to just keep talking to different people, you know, learn them, until you reach a point and you feel comfortable. You know, the more friends you get, the more comfortable you become in the society. But when you've just come, you just wake up every morning, you go to the city centre, on the way you don't talk to anyone, and then you just go back home, sleep, then you wake up and the same again. For months and months. That's why many Africans say they are stressed here. And that has happened to me, just staying, finishing a whole week in my room, stressed. Sometimes, it's like going into the park, you sit down, you see people having fun and everything, and you don't have anyone you can talk to ... it's like someone sees her young kid coming to you, and the mother comes and picks her away as if you were going to do harm to her. You feel hurt but you have to just ignore it because you have nothing you can do for it.'

youth centres and wider public campaigning. Its work in schools and youth groups has a significant impact, reducing bullying by 39%.

It is clear that schools need to be less accepting of bullying. However, both of the above factors mean that programmes that try to increase understanding of refugee issues alone will not necessarily result in less harassment. What needs to change are the policies that lead to refugee children living poor, isolated lives.

Post-16 education

Many young refugees who are over 16 when they arrive (ie, after compulsory school age) are placed straight onto English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) courses at colleges, without any support to realise their other educational and vocational ambitions. As noted earlier, this practice of delaying access to mainstream education dramatically decreases a young person's chance of educational success.⁵³

Greenwich and Lewisham Young

People's Theatre's Voices Project uses specially trained drama teachers to work with a local college's ESOL department, and once a week take over two classes. They use interactive drama games as a tool for language acquisition. This method increases engagement and therefore can increase the speed with which English is picked up. It also develops young people's communication skills and helps to develop their confidence.

Preparing for removal

It is important that young refugees be given the opportunity to learn skills that will be of use to them wherever they end up. If they are going to remain in the UK, it is in our interest to educate them and teach them skills so that they can contribute to the economy. If they are going back to their countries of origin, as many are, they must be given the chance to develop useful skills that can help them once again start a new life.

The media plays a key role in perpetuating opinions that lead to mistreatment of asylum seekers. Information Centre about Asylum and Refugees works to increase understanding about asylum within the media and the general population.

Box 19: Brook's story

Brook, an 18-year-old refugee from Ethiopia, was invited by RefugeeYouth to a jazz concert. He was introduced to young refugees who were acting as youth leaders in other communities and other parts of London. This proved to be a turning point for Brook. While RefugeeYouth supported him to access services, including Leaving Care Services that enabled him to stay in education, Brook himself brought other young people together for World Remix, RefugeeYouth's youth group. He joined RefugeeYouth's ongoing action research team, helped organise sports events with other refugee youth groups, organised an out-of-London holiday break for other young people, represented RefugeeYouth at advocacy meetings with local service providers, and joined the steering group of young people who were developing a business plan for RefugeeYouth.

He has now completed his first year at university, gaining straight As in all his course work. In addition, he successfully applied for a part-time job helping other young refugees to access employment and training.

Charities can make a real difference to these young people's lives by helping them regain a sense of control, building their confidence and engaging them in meaningful activities.

One obvious way to prepare them for life in their country of origin is to make sure that they continue to speak their mother tongue, and become literate in it. This need is often overlooked by both the government and charities. **Albanian Youth Action** runs Albanian language and culture classes for young refugees. The charity is trying to establish a GCSE qualification in Albanian.

ContinYou runs the **Resource Unit for Supplementary and Mother Tongue Schools**, which supports language classes such as those run by refugee community organisations. These are important providers of mother language tuition.

Social networks

Refugee children are likely to lead very isolated and lonely lives. As we have already seen, the main reasons for this are:

- a lack of English;
- moving house many times. It is hard for anybody who is new to an area to make friends. Imagine being in a completely different country, and then being moved around between different areas;

- poverty that stops them from being able to go out with their peers; and
- prejudice and segregation within their communities.

Box 18 shows one boy's despair at his experiences. Education is one way of increasing children's sense of belonging and community, but there are other things that can be done. Reducing this sense of isolation is an area where charities can have a real impact, as they are the only providers of social activities specifically aimed at young refugees. Therefore donors might have a particular interest in supporting this work. There is little hard evidence in support of the results, but plenty of anecdotes about the transformative effect of the work of these charities on previously isolated young people.

Information Centre about Asylum and Refugees (ICAR)

ICAR undertook a video project involving young members of local communities and new arrivals to the cities of Coventry and Peterborough. As well as being a participatory video project that brought together refugee and local young people to make films, it was also an important piece of research into the experiences of these young people.

Many of the new arrivals in Peterborough were housed in accommodation reserved for asylum seekers, and opportunities to mix with locals were rare:

*'For me personally I don't have more opportunities to go out and meet other people from ... Those people that I do meet and make friends with are in my world, my fellow asylum seekers, fellow refugees. But I cannot go into the other classes, the natives the "Fergusons", you know, the typical English names, and it's sad to see that there is that gap.'*⁴⁸

ICAR's project was a success, as can be seen by the resulting films themselves, and the charity's own thorough evaluation of the project. It challenged the young people's prejudices and formed bonds between the different groups. It succeeded because it gave the young people involved, whatever their background, a responsible and valued role in the video-making project. By developing their confidence and skills, they were able to feel more comfortable engaging with those who were different from themselves.

Charities play a key role in helping the children develop friendships. This also starts to link them into their community, neighbourhood and local culture.

Salisbury World runs holiday activities in collaboration with a local adventure playground. Young children from refugee backgrounds spend time at the playground together with others from the local community.



Photograph supplied by RefugeeYouth

Photograph supplied by Salusbury World



Save the Children's Befriending Unaccompanied Minors Project (BUMP)

was set up in 2002 and brings together young adult volunteers living in Birmingham and young refugees living in the area. It runs free social evenings and activities at the weekends. The volunteers act as mentors and become friends with the vulnerable and isolated young refugees. Its work reduces the young refugees' isolation and boredom, and therefore improves their mental health. It also increases their integration into the city.

Many other charities provide youth clubs for young refugees, including the **Refugee Council**, **Trinity Centre**, and **The Children's Society**. Some young people travel for two hours to attend the **Refugee Council's** weekly youth social evening, proving just how few opportunities they have to socialise in their areas.²⁸ Seeing this demand, some dedicated workers from the **Refugee Council** have created the **Anchor Project**, a volunteer-run Saturday youth group.

RefugeeYouth brings together youth groups from various refugee communities at its weekly 'World Remix' social night. In December 2005, it held a unique arts event for 190 young refugees, and repeated the success in 2006 with a turnout of 270. These events bring together young people from different backgrounds, and give them the opportunity to take part in arts, music and dance activities together.

Cultural transition

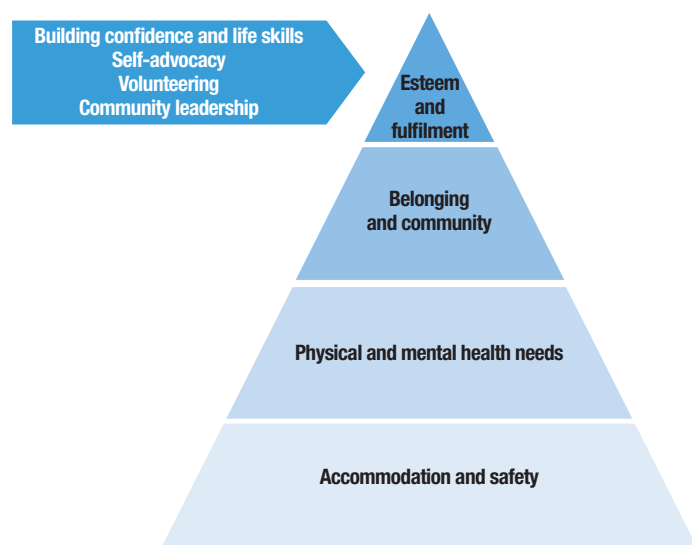
Refugee children are going through difficult issues of cultural transition. One of the links that has been broken is with their home culture and community. On the one hand, it is important for children to maintain some link with their background, both in order to develop a well-rounded sense of themselves, and also in case they return home. On the other hand, they desperately want and need to fit in with their peers in this country.

This tension is particularly difficult for those who arrive with their families. Older family members are often uncomfortable with their children assimilating into British culture. There are cases of young people developing almost a split in their personality, with one set of clothes and behaviour when they are with their British peers, and another when they are at home.⁵⁷

Refugee community organisations that support refugees from particular geographical areas are often focused on the needs and wants of the adults in the community. In contrast, **RefugeeYouth** is a network of youth-led refugee community organisations. These allow the young people to mix with others of their own background, to develop friendships and support groups, and to grow in confidence and self-knowledge.

Charities play a key role in helping the children develop friendships.

Esteem and fulfilment



Box 20: Some groups supported by RefugeeYouth

DAYAH: a youth-led project for young Somalis providing a mentoring service and sports activities for young women.

Nueva Generacion (New Generation): a Latin American experimental community arts youth group.

Safari Youth: a group of young men and women from East Africa who have formed a youth group to share and exchange ideas, and to look at ways of improving their own social lives and the lives of other young people within the community.

Volunteering has many benefits for the individual and society. Save the Children's Befriending Unaccompanied Minors Project encourages and supports young refugees to become volunteers in the community.

Young refugees and asylum seekers are likely to be lacking in self-esteem, which often hampers them in leading fulfilling lives.

Asylum seekers have very little control over their lives. Their asylum application can cause great anxiety, and can take years to resolve. At any point their application might be refused, and, if they are over 18, they may be detained. Most are completely dependent on the state for basic necessities.

Charities can make a real difference to these young people's lives by helping them regain a sense of control, building their confidence and engaging them in meaningful activities.

Building confidence and life skills

Many organisations that run social events and activities for young refugees try to be participatory and involve the young people in preparing events. For example, **The Children's Society's New Londoners** project in Newham runs activities in the school holidays for young refugees. The young people are involved in deciding how to spend the money for the activities, and help out with the arrangements, such as phoning up coach companies for quotes.

A few charities are aiming high and really making a difference to children's lives by providing them with the opportunity to become young leaders and campaigners to help them fulfil their full potential.

Self-advocacy

Save the Children's Brighter Futures project supports groups of young separated refugees in London, Middlesbrough and Manchester to speak out and campaign collectively on issues that affect them. In April 2006, the **Brighter Futures** groups organised and delivered a conference to MPs and practitioners, presenting their concerns on racism, access to education and social services.

Being involved in a project like **Brighter Futures** brings personal as well as social benefits. For the young refugees, it is an opportunity to feel like they are doing something about their situation. They can develop skills and confidence, which will help them now and in the future. They build friendships with others in similar situations, which helps them cope with their experiences.

It is rare that young refugees are given a chance to voice their concerns, and this could have benefits at a societal level. Further 'self-advocacy' should be encouraged, so that policy-makers and service providers are able to hear the thoughts and concerns of the children who are affected by their decisions.

Volunteering

There is a wealth of research and evidence that volunteering is a great way of building skills and confidence, integrating with the local community and benefiting society. Providing volunteering opportunities for young refugees is a priority for all political parties, and a compelling proposition for funders, because



Photograph supplied by RefugeeYouth



Photograph supplied by Refugee Youth

of the double benefit it has on individual volunteers and society. It benefits society by encouraging integration and forging cohesion between new arrivals and the local community, as well as through the voluntary work itself.

However, there appear to be few schemes encouraging young refugees to volunteer, despite the fact that they have so much to gain from such experiences.

Save the Children's Befriending Unaccompanied Minors Project (BUMP) encourages and supports young refugees to become volunteers in the community. For example, some of them have trained as tour guides for the **National Trust**.

Salisbury World, which works with refugee children in a primary school in London, recruits young volunteers from the **Refugee Council's** youth social evening to help out on holiday activities and trips with younger refugees.

Community leadership

RefugeeYouth is a network of youth-led refugee groups from various backgrounds across London. The groups themselves are mostly very small and exist solely due to the dedication and ambition of the young people who run them. However, groups like these can improve the lives of those involved in them, as Brook's story in Box 19 shows.

RefugeeYouth brings together these young leaders and their groups—reaching a total of over 400 people through its training and social activities. It provides opportunities to develop

the young leaders' skills, and thereby increase the capacity of their groups. The groups share ideas and experiences, and are given training to improve their services.

The ethos of the organisation is centred on it being youth-led. As well as supporting the groups and their leaders and organising social activities, they also undertake action research using young people themselves as researchers. This means that its projects are based on the young refugees' own analysis of what they need. For example, they investigated what arts activities are available for young refugees, and questioned the value of some projects run by mainstream organisations. As a result, they decided to set up their own arts events.

Brook's story in Box 19 shows the effect that being involved in **RefugeeYouth** can have. Compare Brook's story with the story in Box 18 of the boy who expressed such extreme isolation that he would go for months without speaking to anyone.

RefugeeYouth's work and reach is based on minimal resources—it has only two part-time paid members of staff.

Box 20 gives an example of some of the innovative groups supported by **RefugeeYouth**.

Turning 18

3

There are around 5,000 adult asylum seekers who were previously looked after as children by social services, and are still entitled to care.

Separated asylum-seeking children do not look forward to their 18th birthday the way most young people do.

For the thousands who have not been granted refugee status it means the end of their discretionary leave, and the beginning of the carousel of extensions and appeals. If their appeal or application for an extension fails, they risk detention and deportation, and having their life uprooted once more. The reality for many is living in limbo, having been refused leave to remain in this country, but not having returned to their home countries.

At the same time, the support that they receive from social services begins to wind down. Their entitlements to education and other services may also

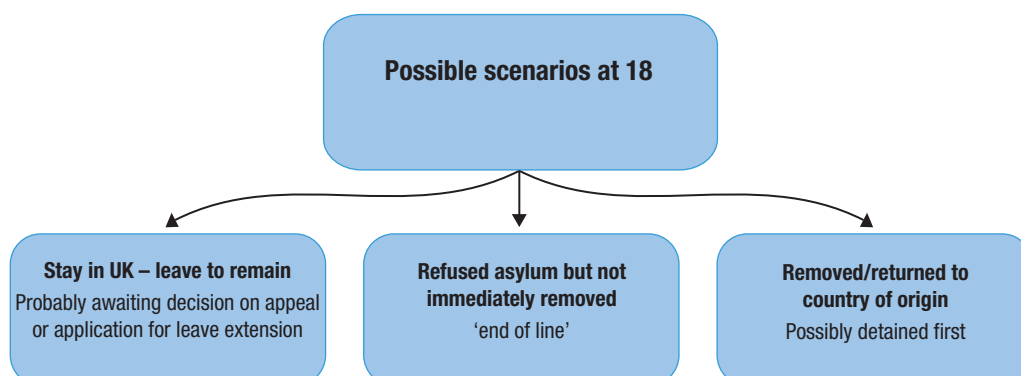
be withdrawn. Therefore there is an important role for private funding to support young people at this stage. Charities can provide a sense of stability and support for young refugees at a time of great anxiety and insecurity.

Possible scenarios at 18

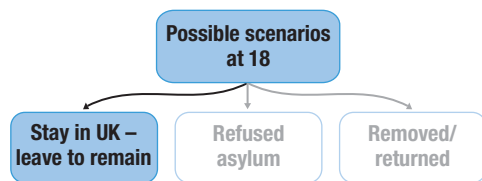
Figure 6 shows the three possible situations facing separated children currently when they turn 18, assuming that they had earlier been refused refugee status but granted discretionary leave (which runs out when they become legal adults). Each situation is dealt with in turn in this section.

This process is likely to change, as the government is keen to reduce discretionary leave and have all appeals and extensions dealt with by the time young people turn 18.

Figure 6: Possible scenarios at 18



Stay in the UK with leave to remain



There are around 5,000 adult asylum seekers who were previously looked after as children by social services, and are still entitled to care.²⁸

Most of these will not have been granted refugee status. Only 5% of applicants aged under 18 are granted refugee status and will therefore have leave to remain after they turn 18.

The thousands who had been granted discretionary leave may remain legally in the UK if they are appealing their refusal of refugee status, or if they are applying for an extension of leave.

While their claim is being decided, they can legally remain in the UK, and should be entitled to continued social services support. This is a period of great anxiety and confusion, both for the young person and professionals working with them. Box 21 gives an example of the difficulties young people can have accessing the services they are entitled to, and how a charity such as **DOST** at **Trinity Centre** can help.

Appeals

A person granted discretionary leave has still been refused refugee status. This means that the Home Office does not believe that the child meets the criteria for being recognised as a refugee. This refusal can be appealed against within ten days of receiving a decision. However, there are two barriers to this.

First, only those with more than one year's leave to remain are entitled to appeal against their decision. Those who receive a decision after they are 17, or those who are from what the government lists as 'safe' countries, such as Albania and Jamaica, and therefore only granted 12 months leave, will not be eligible to appeal. This apparently small detail of policy has important implications.

Second, children will have to find a legal representative to take on their case. Solicitors can only receive legal aid if they believe that the child's case has a good chance of succeeding. Consequently many solicitors are unwilling to take on cases because they face the risk of the Home Office not recognising what might be a solid case.

Box 21: An example of the many ways a charity can help a former separated child

A young Congolese man, Marc, was suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder, experiencing nightmares, insomnia and high levels of isolation and anxiety. He was being treated by the Adolescent Mental Health Team, but when he turned 18 his treatment there had to stop. It would take months before he could be seen by the adult team.

He was referred by his therapist to **DOST** at **Trinity Centre** in east London. At this time, he had many worries about his social services support and education. The transfer to leaving care services was handled badly, and he had five weeks without any social services support. **DOST** helped him financially whilst they were pushing for social services to continue their support.

Marc was keen to go to university, and **DOST** helped him with his applications for courses and financial assistance. He is now at university studying social work, and **DOST** continues to work with him, for example, by helping him with his assignments. They also helped him start volunteering with a children's charity.

He was particularly distressed by his asylum application. His claim had been refused despite a very strong case, so he was appealing the decision. **DOST** accompanied him to solicitor appointments, and liaised with other agencies such as the **Medical Foundation** and mental health services to ensure that the appeals tribunal had all the evidence available. The original decision was overturned, and he was granted refugee status.

There are no official statistics that tell us how many children end up appealing their refusal. Anecdotal evidence from experts and charities in the field suggests that very few children take their case to appeal. This dearth of appeals is partly due to the barriers just described, but may also be because children are unlikely to understand all their rights, and may initially confuse their 'discretionary leave' with refugee status. Charities supporting young asylum seekers are well-versed in the minutiae of asylum law and can help them to understand their rights to appeal, and support them through the process (see Box 21).

Extensions

Young people can apply for an extension of their discretionary leave before it runs out if they do not want to return to their country of origin. While the Home Office is considering this application, which can take many months or even over a year, the young person remains in the UK legally.

Outcomes of appeals and extensions

There are no official figures on the proportion of children's appeals that are successful. One small study found that only 12% of cases were overturned.²² This is surprising given that official statistics show that nearly a quarter of all appeals—from adults and children—are overturned.

There is also no data about the number of people who apply for an extension, and how many receive it. Anecdotally, almost everybody applies but very few receive an extension.³⁸

Charities supporting young asylum seekers are well-versed in the minutiae of asylum law and can help them to understand their rights to appeal, and support them through the process.



This means that many young people exhaust all their rights to appeal and become 'end of line' cases discussed below.

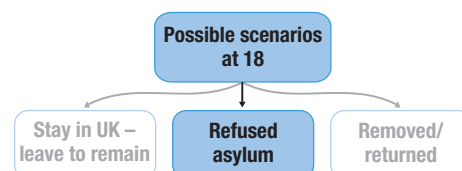
NPC's report, *Home truths*, discussed significant concerns about the way asylum claims are processed. The National Audit Office and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees have both expressed grave misgivings about the Home Office's decisions.

Children have a particularly hard time getting their claim considered. As discussed in Section 1, they are less likely to have a coherent account of their reason for seeking asylum and few have evidence to back up their application. They are more likely to need to rely on the evidence of expert witnesses, of which the Home Office appears to be suspicious.⁵⁸

As discussed in Section 1, the Home Office may have reduced incentives to give due consideration to a separated child's initial asylum claim, because of the almost universal granting of discretionary leave. Therefore the chances of an error being made in a child's asylum case are high.⁷

Some of the children may have fled because of abuses that are related to their age at the time. For example, they might have been forced to become child soldiers or were at risk of female genital mutilation. If this is not given due consideration at the time of the first application, the government can decide that it is no longer relevant to their application when they are 18. They should have been granted refugee status when they applied, but were not, and may now be forced to return as adults to a country that was responsible for such a damaging episode in their lives.

'End of line'



Having exhausted all rights to appeal or extend their leave, many thousands of children end up as adults with no right to be in the UK.

The government's policy is to remove people whose applications for asylum have been rejected and have no other basis for remaining in this country. However, the government often has great difficulties getting permission from the countries of origin and obtaining travel documents for them to return.

Therefore most young people exist in a kind of limbo, which can last for years and has a significant impact on their well-being. These 'end of line' cases are the fastest growing group of young people in social services care,⁵⁹ though the precise number of such young people is unknown. They are particularly vulnerable because their rights and entitlements to services are reduced. Charities can play an important role by continuing to provide services to young people at this difficult time.

There is widespread confusion about the rights and entitlements of 'end of line' cases amongst social workers who work with young asylum seekers and other professionals, despite this being the most likely outcome for most former separated children.

They may be entitled to continue to receive social services support in some circumstances, which is important to their emotional well-being as well as their more practical needs. However, they are not entitled to mainstream benefits or to paid employment. Thus they are not receiving an adequate income from the state, but neither are they able to earn their own money and contribute to the economy.

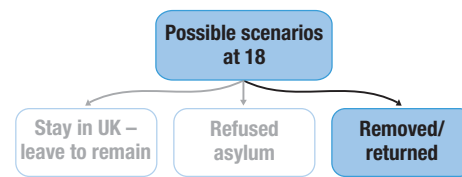
However, the young person may not be entitled to support if they fail to follow immigration rules, such as requirements to report to the Home Office. Failure to follow the rules is one of the main reasons given for detaining failed asylum seekers.

Local authorities vary with regards to the support that they provide to 'end of line' cases. For example, some provide cash support and others do not, and others vary their support on a case by case basis. This has been highlighted by **Save the Children's** research. The confusion felt by social workers is summed up by one of their interviewees:

*'It is so wearying and so difficult for everybody. The solicitors attack us because they don't see us as being helpful to their clients. We feel we are trying to comply with the law but we are not quite sure what the law is. And in the middle of this is ... an extremely confused young person who doesn't know whether they are coming or going.'*²⁹

The Children's Legal Centre plays a key role in taking cases to court to push for clearer guidance on legal entitlements.

Removed to country of origin



The third possible outcome is that the young person can be returned to their country of origin. This can happen if they are forcibly returned by the government. Again, there is no data on how many former child asylum seekers are deported, as by then they are considered adults and are hidden in the statistics. Young people can also decide to return of their own accord, although young people rarely choose this option.⁵⁹ However, support and guidance for those thinking about returning is provided by the charity **Refugee Action's Choices Project**.

Many young people will have been in the UK for two to three years. Despite the barriers to social integration described in the previous section, they may have built links here, and may have lost their connections to their home countries, like the girl in Box 10 who thinks she and her mother are from London.



Photograph supplied by Salisbury World

The Children's Legal Centre website and advice service and Save the Children's publications provide much needed advice for professionals working with these vulnerable young people. Without such information, young people may miss out on benefits and services that they are entitled to.

Young people could be detained before being removed if they have exhausted all their rights of appeal. There are cases of young people being picked up at colleges, without even their foster carers being informed.⁵²

A number of young people disappear at 18 because they are scared of being returned to their country of origin, which causes particular concern for social workers.²⁹ This makes young people even more vulnerable by removing their rights and connections to sources of support.

Support and entitlements

The support to which young asylum seekers are entitled is extremely complicated, confusing and constantly changing due to legal/policy developments, and changes in the young person's status.

The **Children's Legal Centre** website and advice service and **Save the Children's** publications provide much needed advice for professionals working with these vulnerable young people. Without such information, young people may miss out on benefits and services that they are entitled to, and which could help improve their well-being. Box 22 gives an example of how the **Children's Legal Centre** can help young people when other agencies are unable, or unsure of what to do.

Emotional needs

It is difficult to overestimate the confusion and anxiety experienced by young people turning 18 whose immigration status is not permanent.

Mental health problems that may have been under control while there was some security in the young person's life may re-emerge at this time.⁶⁰ Having previously struggled to come to terms with displacement and loss, some now have to deal with the possibility that they will be returned to a country from which they fled.

Charities providing support and advocacy can play an important role in continuing to care for young people whilst all their other entitlements and support is changing. They can take into account the young person's different needs, and deal with them holistically. Such charities include **DOST** at **Trinity Centre**, **The Children's Society's** projects and the **Medical Foundation**.

Box 22: Confusion about entitlements at 18

Asylum seekers who have applied for an extension to their leave before their 18th birthday are entitled to Income Support or Job Seeker's Allowance. The **Children's Legal Centre** helps these young people, who are frequently refused their entitlement by local benefits offices, because the applicants are unable to provide an 'acknowledgement letter' from the Home Office. Such letters are not routinely issued, and are not needed as proof of entitlements for benefits where other proof exists.

The **Children's Legal Centre** is able to intervene with benefits offices and secure these young people's entitlements.

'Triple planning'

Social workers should work with the young person bearing the three possible eventualities in mind, although this is difficult to do in practice. **Save the Children** has published important guides to 'triple planning'.⁵⁹ These emphasise the importance of being open with the young person about what might happen to them.

'Triple planning' needs to be done sensitively, so that young people do not get scared and choose to 'go underground'. On the other hand it must be realistic. This is a difficult balance to strike. It is also hard because few former unaccompanied children are currently being detained and returned. However, enforced removals are likely to increase, both for those over 18 and children.

The most fundamental preparation that young people can receive happens earlier on. As described in Section 2, they will often need support to overcome any mental health problems they have, and to develop their confidence and self-esteem. If this has been successful, they will build up their resilience and be better placed to deal with whatever comes their way.

Save the Children has worked with the charities **Association of Visitors to Immigration Detainees (AVID)** and the helpline **Get Connected** to create a useful tool to help social workers prepare children for the possibility of being detained. It is a simple blue card, with details that will be useful if the child is detained, including a freephone number for the young people's helpline **Get Connected**. The idea is not to scare young people, but to ensure that they know their rights and have access to help. It is a new project and it will be difficult to measure its impact, but the hope is that children will be able to contact people who can help them, for example, by obtaining bail and informing people such as their social workers about their whereabouts.

Leaving care services

Any young person who was 'looked after' by social services for a period of more than 13 weeks is entitled to 'leaving care services'. The Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000 sets out social services' obligations:⁵⁹

- to ensure that young people only leave care when they are ready; and
- to ensure that they receive effective support once they have left.

This applies to most asylum-seeking young people. They should get a personal adviser, a special 'pathway plan' mapping out a path to independence and other advice and assistance from the leaving care team.

Again, there is wide variation between different local authorities.⁵⁹ There are even reports of some local authorities purposely changing their support of the child after 12 weeks, so that they do not qualify for leaving care services.³⁸ If true, this is a shocking tactic for avoiding obligations to care for vulnerable young people, who often are not receiving support from anywhere other than social services.

Education

Young people whose leave has expired are still entitled to continue with their education.⁵⁹ However, as noted in Section 2, post-16 education is not compulsory, and colleges can refuse students at their discretion. For children who are not guaranteed refugee status after they are 18, the college may decide to see this as a reason to refuse them in the first place.

Access to higher education is even more difficult. Some young people are entitled to pay 'home fees' like British students and can receive student loans. Others are not entitled to loans, and others have to pay overseas fees. Again, social services are very confused about these entitlements, and what financial support they should be providing.

Save the Children's Brighter Futures group in Manchester is a group of young refugees campaigning for better access to higher education. It says:

Box 23: Charities providing practical support for young people turning 18

Jawid, a Kurdish boy from Iraq, arrived in the UK aged 16. When he turned 18, he was moved into a bedsit furnished only with a bare mattress. The Children's Society's OASIS Project was able to provide him with the bare essentials to get him started on his own, such as kitchen utensils and soft furnishings. At a difficult time of multiple changes for Jawid, having the means to make his own space more comfortable helped ease his transition to independent living.

The OASIS Project collects donations from staff members, volunteers and well-wishers of household items to help young people at this difficult time.

'Asylum seekers can sometimes wait a long time for a decision on their case and also a long time for a decision to be acted on. They should be allowed to do something productive with their time to gain skills and add value to their lives here or abroad.'

(Brighter Futures Manchester in a letter to Manchester University Admissions)

Housing

Young people turning 18 are usually forced to move out of their accommodation into unsupported and even unfurnished accommodation. Box 23 shows one boy's experiences upon turning 18, and how **OASIS Project** was able to support him.

Mental health problems that may have been under control while there was some security in the young person's life may re-emerge at this time.



Photograph supplied by DOST at Trinity Centre

Conclusions and funding recommendations

There is little evidence about the results of charities' activities. However, the needs of refugee children have been well-documented.

Donors can choose to support charities working in a number of areas.

Children and young people who have been forced to leave their country and come to the UK face many challenges if they are to develop into happy and fulfilled individuals.

Whilst they are here, they encounter multiple barriers to accessing the services that most children take for granted, such as education. Refugee children are resilient, but in some cases, they lead lonely and isolated lives in the UK, which can affect their emotional well-being. This exacerbates any mental health problems that may have been caused by the abuse and violence that prompted them to leave their country, not to mention the psychological pressure of losing their family, friends and homeland.

Their time here is also full of uncertainty and anxiety. They have to navigate an asylum system that is confusing and unclear, and face unknown prospects when they turn 18. This increases the need for stability and security whilst they are here. Given the uncertainty of their future, they must be supported in their development so that they can thrive no matter where they end up, be it Enfield or Eritrea.

Given a little support, often from charities that understand their situation and provide the help they need, young refugees can flourish. They can become excellent students, campaigners and community leaders. They can inspire others and turn their experiences into strengths.

This report has given examples of the many ways that charities can improve the lives of children and young people claiming asylum. Here we highlight three areas where the work of charities is critical:

- Helping children to access services such as education and improving the treatment of refugee children;
- Supporting children through the asylum process and lobbying for a robust system; and
- Increasing refugee children's integration into the community.

Results and evidence

Charities working with young refugees and asylum seekers are a mix of specialist charities set up to meet the needs of this group (these tend to be small, focused projects such as

Salisbury World), children's charities (eg, **The Children's Society**) and refugee charities (eg, the **Refugee Council**). Many of the projects are relatively new—the **Refugee Council Children's Panel**, at 12 years old, is probably the oldest of those discussed in this report.

A problem for donors is that there is little measurement of the results of the work of many of the charities NPC visited. This is partly due to the relative youth of the sector, and also due to more general factors such as lack of resources and motivation for undertaking in-depth evaluations, and difficulties in measuring results. On top of this, the precarious nature of the future of many of the young people makes it even harder to evaluate the impact of services they may have used whilst in the UK.

The available evidence about the importance of the direct services the charities provide to these young people—from support through the asylum process to running social events—is anecdotal. However, this is not often collated, and anecdotal evidence is insufficient grounds to make grand claims about the work of these charities. The lack of evidence therefore makes it hard to assess where funding can have the most impact, and creates risks for donors. There is a risk that funding will be wasted money, and will not make a dent in the problem.

On the other hand, the needs of refugee children have been well-researched by charities and academics. Their lives are lacking in many of the things that are generally accepted to be important parts of youth and childhood—friends, fun and education. Charities are well-placed to help children and young people with these elements of their lives, and such work should be supported in order to avoid discriminating against children because of their asylum status.

As well as the direct work with young people, the lobbying, research and campaigning work of charities is crucial to ensure that the needs of children are not completely overlooked in immigration policy. It is difficult to assess the impact of such campaigning, especially when the policies still appear to oppose the charities' demands. However, there have been some important successes.

Table 4 gives examples of the results of some of the activities of charities discussed in the report.

Table 4: Examples of the results of charities' work with young refugees

Area	Example of activity	Results
Helping children access education and other services.	Helping children get school places, eg the educational work done by Children in Vulnerable Accommodation (CHIVA) .	The earlier children are put into mainstream education, the more able are they to perform well academically, especially if they have previous experience of education in their country of origin. School also helps them to integrate into their community, by forming relationships with other young people from the local area and improving their English. CHIVA liaises with schools and colleges to find places for young refugees, particularly those aged 16-17 who often face discrimination when trying to get college places. Without CHIVA's help, these young people may be out of education completely, or may only be enrolled on English courses.
Improving the treatment of refugee children.	Research, such as that done by Save the Children about separated children and their treatment.	Research raises awareness of the needs of refugee children, who are otherwise lacking a voice, and of the services they receive. This helps challenge poor practice and policy, as well as increasing debate about the issues. Two years after Save the Children's report <i>Cold Comfort</i> , which identified many deficiencies in the way some social services were dealing with refugee children, the government issued clearer guidance to local authorities on their responsibilities towards young refugees.
Providing scrutiny of changing asylum systems and lobbying for a robust process.	Lobbying and campaigning, such as that done by individual charities and through the Refugee Children's Consortium . The Consortium brings together experts from various charities (including The Children's Society , Save the Children and the Refugee Council) and draws on their individual and organisational strengths and expertise to communicate their concerns with the government.	It is difficult to assess the effectiveness of lobbying work, particularly in an area where there are such strong hostile opinions and policies. However, there have been some important concessions made thanks to campaigning by the Refugee Children's Consortium . For example, the 2004 Asylum and Immigration Act introduced 'Section 9', a law that would allow the government to enforce harsh punishments on families whose asylum claims had failed and who had not taken steps to leave the country. One punishment would be taking their children away from them and putting them into social services care. As a result of the Consortium's efforts, the bill included a rare caveat that the policy could be 'repealed by order', ie, without going back through parliament. This repeal has not yet been made, and the policy is being piloted in some areas. However, in the face of great criticism, the government appears to have put on hold plans to roll out the policy.
Increasing refugee children's integration into the community.	Increasing young people's social networks, such as through Save the Children's Befriending Unaccompanied Minors Project . This project brings together young separated asylum seekers and young adults from the local area for social events and trips.	Extending people's social networks reduces their isolation and loneliness. This can help improve their mental health, reduce their boredom and increase their integration into the community. On top of the benefits to the individual, such outcomes are good for society: if young refugees are left bored and marginalised, there is a risk they might become engaged in anti-social behaviour or even turn to criminal activities.

There is a need for a robust asylum system that treats children as children.

Accessing and improving education and other services

Charities help children access services to which they are entitled and push for better services, for both individuals and for young refugees in general.

Individual support

Charities can help individuals to access basic services such as school places. They can also provide a constant source of support that separated children lack.

Children in Vulnerable Accommodation (CHIVA) employs an educational worker who can help young refugees overcome educational discrimination to get places in schools and colleges.

Child refugees may go some months without a school place. They are missing out on the many benefits of mainstream education, and putting at risk their future ability to do well at school.

Charities can replicate some of the benefits of being at school, by providing activities that reduce boredom and isolation, and improve confidence and self-esteem. **DOST at Trinity Centre, Greenwich and Lewisham Young People's Theatre** and **Oval House Theatre** all run programmes for young people without school places.

Improving services

Save the Children's research has been vital in efforts to document and raise awareness of the problems facing refugee children living in social services care. It has led to clearer guidance from central government on the obligations of social service departments.

Social workers and professionals working with refugee and asylum-seeking children are confused by the complexities of the law and the different rights and entitlements of children at different stages of the asylum process. **Children's Legal Centre's** website is a fundamental resource providing up-to-date clear information about young refugees and asylum seekers. **Save the Children** also publishes regular guidance on such issues.

Campaigning for better treatment of children

The **Refugee Children's Consortium** consists of many charities working with child refugees, including **The Children's Society**, **Medical Foundation** and the **Refugee Council**. They work together to ensure that the rights and needs of children are promoted.

They are a well-organised and highly effective group, which lobbies government on all manner of issues, including the need to treat child refugees well whilst they are in the UK.

Supporting children through the asylum process and lobbying for a robust system

There is a need for a robust asylum system that treats children as children. The government is reviewing its policy on unaccompanied children. Great changes are likely, including the possibility of returning failed asylum seekers while they are still children. This increases the need for a better decision-making process, in order to avoid sending those with a genuine need for protection back to the country they fled from.

The work of charities such as that done through the **Refugee Children's Consortium** is vitally important to act as a check on government policy and to highlight cracks in the system.

There is a need to support children through the process that currently exists, for example, to help them access age assessments and legal advice. The **Refugee Council Children's Panel** and **Refugee Arrivals Project** work with many age-disputed young people, and push social services to carry out proper assessments to determine their age.

DOST at Trinity Centre and **The Children's Society's** projects provide individual advice and guidance to help young people overcome immediate barriers to education, to decent accommodation and to legal support.

Increasing refugee children's integration into the community

Refugee children need to integrate into their communities. This also benefits the community by reducing problems caused by segregation. Charities can help by rebuilding many of the links that children have lost when they fled their country.

Building social networks

School is where most children make friends, and refugee children are no different. Advocacy charities discussed above help children access mainstream school places.

Many of the above projects also run social events in the evenings, at weekends and during holidays, such as **DOST at Trinity Centre**, **The Children's Society's** projects and the **Refugee Council**. There is great demand for such activities, which shows they are needed and valued.

Salisbury World and Save the Children's Befriending Unaccompanied Minors

Project both run activities where young refugees and members of the local community are able to socialise together.

Developing skills and increasing self-esteem

Increasing children and young people's self-esteem and confidence can both improve their mental health and make it easier for them to connect with the community. This then has the further benefit of reducing their isolation, which leads to further improvements in their well-being.

Save the Children's Brighter Futures

project gives young refugees the opportunity and responsibility to campaign on issues that affect them, such as racism and access to higher education. **RefugeeYouth** brings together many young leaders from across the refugee community to learn from each other and share their experiences.

Both these projects increase skills and confidence at the same time as extending the young people's social networks.

Young people's self-esteem can be improved through academic success. **The Children's Society's OASIS Project** has a support worker based in a school to enable students to overcome any issues that prevent them from achieving their best in school.

Supporting parents

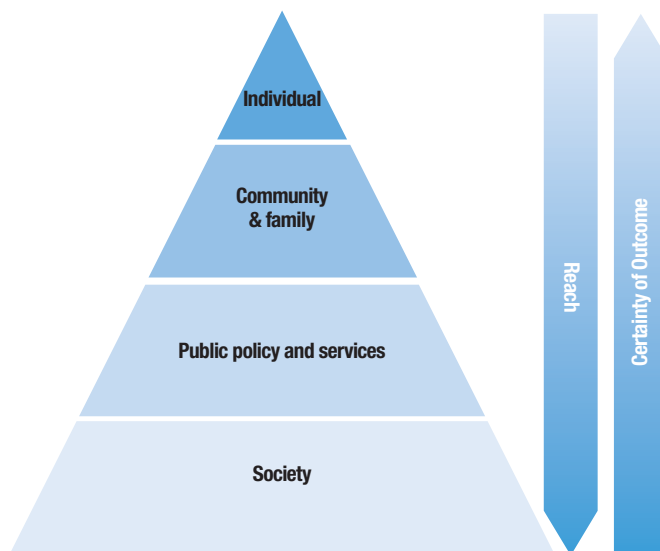
Children are heavily affected by the experiences of their parents. NPC's report, *Home truths*, discussed the problems adults face in navigating the asylum process, accessing services and integrating into their communities. It highlighted many charities that can help refugees with everything from their asylum application, mental health problems, employment and integration.

Salisbury World not only supports refugee children in the school where it is based, but also provides advice, support and social activities for their parents. This increases parents' confidence and ability to deal with problems, and allows them to form friendships with each other.

Conclusion

Donors can make a huge difference to the lives of the thousands of children who have no choice but to try to make the most of their time in the UK. Charities are well-placed to help them to tackle some of these problems, but it is difficult for them to get funding for their work. Given both the needs of the young people and the lack of resources, donors have the opportunity to make a difference with a relatively small amount of funding.

Figure 7: Levels of activity



The priorities discussed here have different levels of risk and impact. Figure 7 shows how reach and certainty of outcomes tend to vary depending on whether charities work at an individual or more broad, societal level. For example, lobbying for better treatment of young separated refugees could have a significant impact on over 5,000 children. However, the results of such work cannot be guaranteed. Helping a child to make friends and gain confidence is very likely to make a huge difference, but just to that one child.

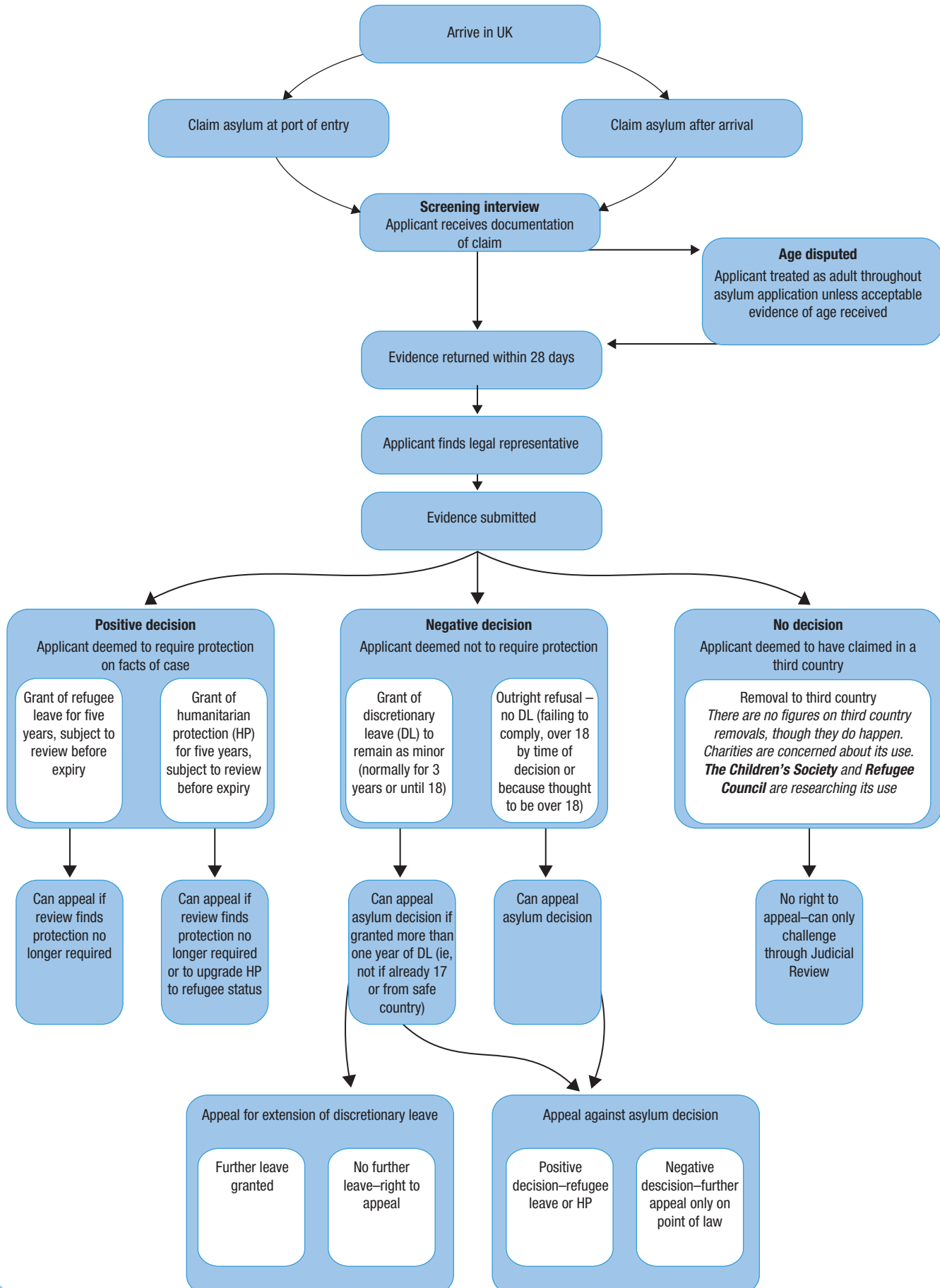
Donors can choose to work at more than one level, and support a portfolio of charities, or they can focus on one particular issue or area. The lack of hard evidence makes such decisions difficult. NPC thinks that donors interested in helping charities working with young refugees should provide resources to allow them to evaluate and measure their impact of their activities. This could have a long-term benefit for the young refugees and asylum seekers a charity works with if it helps it to improve its services, and articulate its work and impact to other donors.

All of this could result in better lives for the 60,000 refugee children living in the UK.

Donors can make a huge difference to the lives of the thousands of children who have no choice but to try to make the most of their time in the UK.

Appendix

Overview of the asylum process for 'separated' children as at December 2006



Acknowledgements

We are very grateful to the following individuals—and their organisations—for their input into this report:

Caroline ffrench Blake and Xhevat Ademi	Albanian Youth Action
David Cottrell	Asphaelia Action
Sarah Cutler	Bail for Immigration Detainees
Melanie Shaw and Christina Colledge	Bradford Action for Refugees
Adrian Matthews	Children's Legal Centre
Paul Bollom	Children in Vulnerable Accommodation
Emily Hunka and David Wright	Greenwich and Lewisham Young People's Theatre
Adrian Sinclair and Linda Strudwyck	Heads Together
Sheila Melzak, Syd Bolton and Sean McFadden	Medical Foundation for the Care of Victims of Torture
Sheree Kane	National Children's Bureau
Stella Barnes	Oval House
Angela Kleeman	Place2Be
Marion McGuire, James Davies and Patricia Williams	Refugee Arrivals Project
Judith Dennis and Jane Dykins	Refugee Council
Ros Norton and Lucy Pearson	RefugeeYouth
Sarah Reynolds and Lynne Knight	Salisbury World
Ros Norton, Hannah Newth and Jessica Nott	Save the Children
Lisa Nandy, Joyce McCullagh, Chloe Purcell, Myfanwy Franks, Susan Clare, Beth Green and Sarah Galligan	The Children's Society
Yesim Deveci	DOST at Trinity Centre
Wendy Hawk	Rainer
Afsana Amaresh	Voice YP

Additionally we are heavily indebted to the following individuals, who provided us with valuable input or took the time and care to read the consultation version of this report:

Heaven Crawley	Centre for Immigration Policy Research, Swansea University
Adrian Matthews	Children's Legal Centre
Bharat Mehta	City Parochial Foundation
Feria Henry-Thomas	Diana Memorial Fund
Nadine Finch	Garden Court Chambers
Jane Cook	Health Opportunities Promotion and Education
John Adams	Immigration and Nationality Directorate
Sophie Wainwright	Information Centre about Asylum and Refugees
Steve Lidicott	London Borough of Croydon
Jill Rutter	London Metropolitan University
Laurence Chester	Marchbid
Syd Bolton	Medical Foundation for the Care of Victims of Torture
Judith Dennis	Refugee Council
Tim Spafford	Refugee Education
Anita Sollis	Southfields Community College

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Notes

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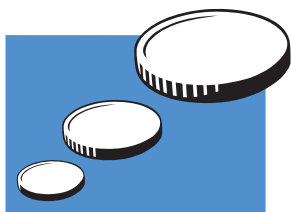
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Published by New Philanthropy Capital All rights reserved
ISBN 978-0-9553148-1-0

Designed by Falconbury Ltd Printed by Quadracolor on 75% recycled stock