

# The mental wellbeing of young former unaccompanied asylum seeking children in East Kent - Final Report

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## *Summary*

Unaccompanied asylum seeking children (UASC) come to the UK to escape war or persecution in their home countries. They enter the UK Care system but many find that they have limited rights to remain in the UK when they reach adulthood.

Funded by Mind's development in East Kent to carry out research with young people in Kent who had arrived in the UK as children. Our aim was to learn about their perspectives with a view to making recommendations for how services could be improved. We interviewed eight young people and all but one of them had been refused refugee status and, as a result, were threatened with destitution, detention and deportation. They describe moving from feeling part of British society, cared for and legally resident, to marginalisation and disempowerment as migrants facing immigration control, detention and deportation. The eight male<sup>1</sup> participants in this study originally came from Eritrea, Afghanistan and Sri Lanka and have lived in the UK between three and eight years.

The interviews reveal their perspectives on their experience in the UK and identify specific threats to their mental health and wellbeing.

These threats are:

- Being an unaccompanied asylum-seeking child and accordingly having suffered the loss of family and home at an early age
- An often-dangerous journey and traumatic experiences in country of birth.
- Living within the Care and asylum systems in the UK
- Age assessment and asylum seeking processes, especially Immigration appeals, that young people have found confusing and punitive

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<sup>1</sup> Girls were not excluded from the study but are heavily outnumbered by boys as UASC in Kent. Girls are also more likely to be fostered and to receive positive decisions on their asylum claims.

- Rejection of asylum cases and adult immigration controls which include reporting, detention, destitution and the threat of deportation.

### Mental health and wellbeing

- The young people describe their poor mental health and wellbeing detailing how they live with anxiety, loss, sleeplessness and uncertainty about the future.
- They describe feeling unsupported and a lack of on-going treatment and care

### Recommendations

We identified a number of gaps in service provision and found that neither therapy to address past problems nor support to develop resilience and to plan their futures has been available to them. We found:

- A lack of preventative and holistic work
- A need for increased psychosocial support (including legal support) and specialist therapeutic interventions
- A need to explore partnership with local and national bodies with a view to creating a post based on a 'social prescribing' model specifically to work with young people as they reach adulthood and beyond.

To accompany this Report, a video has been made by an independent filmmaker with the young people supported by Kent Refugee Action Network's Refugee Youth Project. Along with selections from the interview transcripts and young people's artwork, this video will be used in an Exhibition that is an additional output of this project.

Throughout this Project we have begun with the testimony of the young people to foreground their experience and opinions. The interviews were clearly difficult for most of the young people but they were motivated by a desire to improve services and the experiences of new arrivals:

*"I don't mind where we start so long as my interview makes some difference – makes things better for young people helps others bring some change ..."*<sup>2</sup>

### Acknowledgements

Firstly we would like to thank the young people who allowed us to use their stories and reflections in this Project.

We also acknowledge the financial support of MIND who provided funding. In addition we acknowledge the support of the Kent Refugee Action Network's Refugee Youth Project who interviewed and supported the young people who described their experiences so openly and candidly.

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<sup>2</sup> Text in italics directly quotes young people's testimony

## ***Introduction***

This research explores the experiences of young men struggling to secure a future in the UK – a country where they have spent important years of their young lives. Many describe symptoms of mental distress and all are concerned for their own mental wellbeing or for their friends’.

Unaccompanied asylum seeking children (UASC) come to the UK to escape war or persecution in their home countries. As children under 18 years old and separated from adult family members they are placed in local authority care and are considered ‘looked after children’. Once over 18 however, if their asylum case has not been accepted by the Home Office, they become subject to adult systems of immigration control and can lose entitlement to education, housing, benefits and work. As migrants, they currently have limited rights under the Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000 provisions and these rights will reduce if the new Immigration Bill 2015-16 becomes law.

An interim project report, attached as Appendix 1, drew on interviews, published literature, a young person’s blog and some films with young people. It identified the following five themes:

- A sense of being different from their peers
- Not being listened to or understood
- Purposelessness
- Loss – of community, family, future
- Fear - of reporting, detention and forced removal

The final conclusions of this project remain true to these themes but they and other themes, have been arranged into three sections arising from direct interviews with young people:

- Becoming an unaccompanied asylum seeking child
- Asylum rejected
- Mental health and wellbeing

We are indebted to the staff of the Kent Refugee Action Network’s Refugee Youth Project (henceforth KRAN) who digitally recorded interviews from eight young people who spoke in detail about their experiences. Most of these interviews lasted over an hour. KRAN staff used their prior relationships with these young people to engage them in the research and explained to them the purpose of the study and that their names and personal details would be kept secure<sup>3</sup>. They also made themselves available to any young people needing support after the interviews.

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<sup>3</sup> Ethics approval was obtained from the SSPSSR, University of Kent Ethics Committee

### ***Being an unaccompanied asylum seeking child***

Finding a place to begin their narrative was a problem for some young people. Some explicitly didn't want to talk about their journey, what had forced them to leave home or what had happened to them on the way. Many expressed powerlessness and felt, that as children, they had just done what adults had told them to do and they hadn't understood why they had had to leave.

P3 however was acutely aware of the danger he was in as he escaped: *"At the airport I was so scared because I know it's a false passport – maybe they'll put me in prison and it will get worse – but Dad said don't worry – its hell now."* Others travelled overland with their journey managed by others and were passed on from agent to agent. P6 told us *"My Mum send me to my father's best friend, she says go with him ... my Mum scared – they killed my father they should kill you. I don't know the countries - just go with people they are, like, selling you – go with that person ..."* P8 had a similar story - *"I was totally lost ... they arrange and pass to this person to flee the country. I had been told he's a good person he won't give you back to the people who are looking for you, he will take you somewhere nice ... I have to trust him ... and then I ended up in different, different countries - sometimes in a lorry, in a small room, sometimes in the jungle, hunger, no food, no water ... a few times lost my clothes, ended up with the dirty clothes no shower ... I had a very, very bad time then ..."*

Arrival in the UK was another potentially traumatic experience as most were treated as adults until their age was established. P6 said *"The Police arrest us – they bring to a small, small room – I had never in my life been to a police station – I was shocking ... it was so difficult for me - they say OK someone is coming to talk to you, they bring Interpreter ... after I don't know how many hours – no wash no nothing."* P8 was 14 when he arrived but it was days before he was treated as the child he was. *"I got arrested and taken to the police station - I was there for some time and they transferred me to a hotel. Some people they came and they interviewed me. One lady she felt so sorry for me – she said you are very little, we are going to transfer you to a family where you can go to school - it was first time seeing someone being nice and talking to me in a good way and they transfer me to foster family ... and I start living ..."*

The age assessment process is crucial to the lives of young people. The age assessment determines whether young people will be placed in foster families (for under 16 year olds or especially vulnerable children) or in independent housing as well as how long a young person will receive automatic protection as a child. Age determination, as a social work 'technique', is difficult and unscientific. It relies on the skills of specialists combining what a young person tells them about their life history and on developmental clues. This highly subjective process is complicated by institutional and possibly political pressure on social workers to over-estimate the age of young people for budgetary reasons as well as political ones (Mathews 2014). P7 describes his experience of age assessment:

*"The social workers had their own way of assessing our age. They would assess my age based on the times I had travelled and had been living - he*

*just calculate all these time – I didn't remember the exact times or years so it wasn't accurate and he just assessed my age as 17 - that was a big mistake which cost me, you know, cost me dearly to be honest, cost me a lot – imagine if you are assessed 2 years older and you don't have the experience of 17 year- old - you are only 15 ... you struggle with things."*

P1 told us: *"I did have a problem with my age because when I arrived here I was 13, but they couldn't believe it. They said I was 16 then a couple of weeks later they said I was nearly 17. I bring them my information - my ID from home – I proved them I was 13 but they still didn't believe so I went to Age Assessment. They accept me as 15 and after one week accept me as 14 – it was one of the most horrible things for me."*

Age disputes can get very complicated as P4 found out when he ended up with two different dates of birth meaning he was eligible, or ineligible, to different types of support– *"Now if I get a letter from Liverpool date of birth is going to be January 1991, from Croydon or some other part it will be July 1989 what social services assessed me as."*

The young people we spoke to felt ill equipped to speak for themselves and deal with the complex systems they met in the UK. Legal researchers Warren and York (2014) have analysed how the legal system has let down young people and these interviews bear out their findings. Most UASC will be granted Discretionary Leave to Remain soon after arrival. This status allows them to stay until 18 but their continued right to remain depends on whether their claim for refugee or humanitarian status is allowed. Young people often refer to Discretionary Leave to Remain as a 'visa' and most feel content to begin their lives once they have received it. It is often only when young people reach 18 and the end of their 'visa' that they realise their asylum claim was refused and that not having challenged that refusal, they are vulnerable. Refused asylum claims need to be appealed as a matter of priority as attempts to remove these young people will start soon after their visas end and they reach adulthood by official calculation.

In addition, the reduction in legal aid for asylum cases (under LASPO<sup>4</sup>) means that young people turning 18 and refused leave to remain often have to represent themselves in Court – something they were completely unprepared to do. P7 explains *"So for a child its very difficult to be able to fight for himself to get his paper, his visa and everything – a child needs more help – 15/16 year old needs some encouragement and a lot of help until the person has his visa to carry on with his life however he want it to ..."* He continued, *"... we don't know about these things, official things ... even though I knew the language it was a new thing and normally new things are scary especially when you life is hanging ... if you are not ready you are going to make a mess and its going to go against you – if you are ready everything will be sorted – if I went to Court now, the same Court, it would be total different situation. But when I went at that time, I was ill, I was mentally messed up basically. "*

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<sup>4</sup> Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 2012

Challenging immigration decisions means Court appearances which are difficult for anyone, never mind a young person struggling with day-to-day life in a strange culture with a strange language. As P6 said *“Going to Court is so difficult – they ask questions, questions, questions for decision, decision – decision is coming ... refused. I have been six or seven times I think so or more than that ...”* Without representation it can be ordeal.

### ***Asylum rejected***

All of the young men we interviewed had been refused asylum at some point and only one of them has since been accepted as a refugee. They had first been shocked to be refused and then frightened to learn that refusal could mean return to countries of origin.

P7 – *“When I was refused, ... I couldn’t think of anything - I was undone they will send me back I just didn’t know what to do or what to think of – you know when your mind freezes and you don’t know what to do, what to think – I was very, very upset at that time.”*

Negative decisions can be challenged on the basis of mistakes made in evidence or in law. Claimants can also appeal if they have a ‘fresh claim’ based on private life established in the UK (Article 8<sup>5</sup> human rights claims) or on new evidence of danger in countries of origin. A successful appeal requires more than an objectively strong case and a young person’s chances of success are greatly improved by being able to secure legal representation and by pursuing the case actively.

Refusal and classification as Appeal Rights Exhausted (ARE) brings a radical change in living circumstances and increasing levels of immigration control. If a formal Human Rights assessment determines they have no further right to support they will become destitute and ineligible for state funded accommodation. Entering the adult asylum system may relocate them away from familiar surroundings and their social networks. They are not allowed to work, claim benefits or access education. Young people face detention and enforced return.

P8 – *“I had made friends, made a life and then I lost my case in 2011. I’d been given many opportunities and they took all of it back. They stopped financial support, I’d been given a house and they took the house away and I start facing the issues again. I ended up on the street ...”*

The Home Office’s Immigration, Compliance and Enforcement (ICE) department requires many young people to report at designated reporting centres on a regular basis. Reporting (also referred to as ‘signing’) keeps track of people identified for removal. For some with ongoing legal appeals it may only be an inconvenience but for those who are ARE and without outstanding appeals reporting is extremely stressful as they know that they may be detained, in Immigration Removal Centres (IRC) and potentially deported, directly from the reporting centres.

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<sup>5</sup> Article 8 of the ECHR – the Right of Private and Family Life

P2 describes his experience of regular reporting “3 times I was refused and every 2 weeks I had to go to Folkestone to sign – for maybe 2 years. They told me that they didn’t believe my story. I was fed up I didn’t know what they were going to do with me – even deport ... if they don’t deport me what am I going to do I had no paper what am I going to do? For 2 years I signed every week. I went by myself ... I used to see people there same like my experience they were from Eritrea, Afghanistan some still they do - 7 or 8 years later.”

Three of our interviewees described their experience of detention. Immigration detention in the UK is ‘administrative’ and intended to facilitate removal rather than to ‘punish’ a crime. It is also large and, in the year ending November 2015, 32,446 people had entered the detention estate<sup>6</sup>. The UK, however, is inefficient in its goal of removing people from the country and around half of all detainees are released rather than removed from detention. Removals clearly happen however and the young people we interviewed all knew people who had been forced out of the UK. Figures released in February 2016 showed that since 2007, 2,748 young care leavers had been returned to their countries of origin; the majority, 2,018, have been returned to Afghanistan<sup>7</sup>.

The uncertainty of indefinite detention, without a release date, is hard for anyone to deal with. P7 said “When I was in detention there were guys who were there for 2 years, 3 years and I asked them why are you here that long and he said I don’t know! Imagine if a person is being held in prison but nobody is considering his case why is he here for this long why is he not sent back instead he’s being kept for a year or 2 years. They have lives you know they have lives! Being in detention centre for 2 years and the guy doesn’t know why - its crazy ... its just crazy.”

As well as confinement, uncertainty and the loss of friends and normal life, detainees fear removal. P8 said “... it was worrying me like if they send me back to Afghanistan, what would I do? Who would I ask for help? I don’t have any connection and I worry mostly about my safety – if I go there them people would find out and catch me and what they would do with me? ... and that was the most thing - I so scared.” A recent report on a monitoring project with returned Afghan care leavers (Gladwell et.al. 2016) indicates these fears are justified and the 25 returnees interviewed over 18 months reported insecurity, mental health problems and a lack of education or employment opportunities. Afghan care leavers in the UK keep in contact with friends who have been removed via social media so hear first hand about life in Afghanistan.

Even if people are released from detention, their troubles are not over. While they are ARE they will remain without recourse to public funding or the right to work. They must survive in destitution, sleeping on friends’ floors or sleeping rough relying of charity handouts to eat.

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/immigration-statistics-october-to-december-2015/detention>

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-question/Commons/2015-10-23/13206/>

## ***Mental health and wellbeing***

The testimony presented above describes experiences of loss and trauma in early childhood being compounded by uncertainty and further negative experiences in the UK. This combination of stress, fear, uncertainty and anxiety has obvious implications for the wellbeing of the young people we spoke to.

The interviewees all made reference to mental wellbeing and illness but chose to focus on different areas of their experience. Some described their experiences in countries of origin while others described how events in the UK – such as the age assessment process, being refused asylum, court appearances, reporting and detention – affected them as crisis points or as long-term sources of anxiety and stress. Some described how they had maintained positivity and avoided lapsing into mental illness while others described their chronic ill health and/or specific acute episodes. Most described being scared – of dangerous people in countries of origin, during the journey and of officials and situations in the UK. Several described the acute fear they felt being threatened with forced to return to their countries of origin. They describe feeling unsupported, including by care workers, and they describe how their uncertain immigration status and the threat of deportation undermined their sense of well-being.

The lack of anyone they could trust is common and for many, their fearfulness refers back to their memories of strangers guiding them on their journey to the UK. For P5 *“We are away from our family, our parents, its difficult, sometimes you have very difficult times – depressing - you haven’t got people you trust to tell your feelings.”* This lack of constant, secure, relationships extends to health and social care professionals and P4, described starting and re-starting therapeutic relationships:-

*“... they moved me to Leicester – I was still in a mess – the problem when you get mentally unstable, once you trust someone and then you get to move you have to start with another person and tell them all the things again. I was starting everything from 2008 to 2012 telling this – I got fed up with it – I have to repeat more than 10 times before I get somewhere which is fine, if it does get somewhere but it never got anywhere... it wasn’t solving anything...”*

Simply missing and worrying about family members is also debilitating as P6 describes *“So difficult - my brain is not working properly ... if I go to College anywhere I’m not listening to teacher - just thinking about family ... I don’t know where are they – my Uncle he sent his cousin to our village he says they are not here I don’t know ... I try many different ways – the British Red Cross (Tracing Service) they say we don’t know but maybe they are in different country I don’t know exactly... I miss them ....”*

Many young people describe their inability to concentrate and that their troubles creep into everyday life and undermine their capacity to study or work. Some young people seek release in drugs and alcohol and many express chronic sleep problems.



Refusal, as already discussed, marks the start of a succession of anxiety-inducing, and perilous, events that include detention and forced removal.

In this long section from an interview, P4 describes the impact of refusal on his health:

*“Came 2008, I was drinking and wandering around here and there, ... my Leave to Remain finished I thought they were going to give me another one but I didn’t realise I had to go through all this nightmare to get another one... I went into a mess – no place to stay, not allowed to work, not allowed to claim benefits you are not allowed to do anything but survive – do whatever to stay alive. Everything from the past kicked in I was wandering around having a screen in front of me most of the time rewinding playing the same thing most of the time - in front of me over and over again – that was the worst thing – playing things from the past from Afghanistan – the worst things you can imagine... I was seeing those things plus I wasn’t sleeping plus nightmares – the tension and trouble from the Home Office all of those added up and I couldn’t do anything. I thought I should give up – I’m going to give up – I should give up. Now I survived for about 2 years but after 2 years it got to a point I had to do something about it or finish it off – I started hurting myself, to cut myself, to overdose on illegal drugs – I cut myself in 2010 or 2011 ... while I was in other people’s houses.”*

Immigration control mechanisms, such as reporting/signing and threats to detain, have a direct impact on mental health and participants described their experience of reporting and its impact on their everyday lives:

*P7 – “Signing is another weapon that they use to make us suffer even more – their strategy is to make us suffer here long so that we voluntarily leave the country. If I am signing once a week – just knowing that I have to sign, its always in your head before you sleep when you sleep... you dream about being taken away and constantly think about this place where you have to go to report – that’s another psychological misery that they put on us ...”*

*P1 “I’ve got to sign ... every minute every second for me like attacks I’m afraid I think Immigration are going to come to my house and take me so I’m feeling like scary – like they are going to send me over there.”*

Immigration detention has been shown to be damaging to mental health by many authorities and these have been summarised in a review commissioned by the Home Office. This review found that “There is a consistent finding from all the studies carried out across the globe and from different academic viewpoints that immigration detention has a negative impact upon detainees’ mental health. The impact on mental health increases the longer detention continues” (Shaw 2016:14). This finding is borne out by published data on self-harm in detention centres which show a rising trend; 2,597 detainees were on suicide watch during 2015<sup>8</sup>. We argue here that it is not only detention that is harmful to the health and wellbeing of our young care leaver

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<sup>8</sup> <http://www.no-deportations.org.uk/Media-2014/Self-Harm2015.html>

participants but that the anticipation of detention as well as its reality damages them.

### ***What might services look like?***

The interviews and literature review (see Interim Report Appendix 1) carried out for this project lead us to some simple recommendations for service development. These are considered below:

#### **Acknowledge the constraints of working within a punitive immigration system:**

The capacity for any psychosocial support service to assist young people under immigration control is clearly limited by the political constraints placed on migrants without permanent leave to remain in the UK (Robinson 2014). These constraints compound other challenges such as the experiential heritage of young people experiencing mental health problems along with the practical problems of working across language and culture (Watters 2001). Severe, diagnosed mental illnesses are sometimes impediments to removal and legal cases to remain have been made on grounds of illness. In such cases, people threatened with removal can obtain a 'stay of execution' but they remain in the invidious position of being safe only while they remain ill. 'Recovery' thus may mean the end of temporary security and the beginning of fresh attempts to remove. This was the situation that P4 found himself in, granted a temporary visa because of a severe psychotic episode that gave him a breathing space but no long-term security:

*"... maybe they have a new rule that people who are mentally fucked up or ill or anything - I don't know - give them 2 years see if they get better, if they get better you can send them back. How can you expect them to get better when you put this thing in their head? It means - here's a piece of candy and we are going to slaughter you later on - it means that thing. It did help - it did help with some things the council re-housed me back in Canterbury I could claim benefit I didn't have to run around for food or wander around to other people houses to wait for them to finish work so I could sleep - it didn't help - its not going to help - it will slightly but not that much."*

P4's situation gives a clear example of how health professionals and therapists working with ARE young people walk a line between trying to support the wellbeing of a young person from within a system that is compromising that support.

In addition, P4's testimony demonstrates the extreme lack of 'ontological security' - an individual's capacity to place themselves in a future narrative - that is typical of the experience of ARE care leavers. Elaine Chase (2013) writes "It suggests that Giddens' (1991) concept of ontological security offers an important additional dimension to contemporary constructions of wellbeing since it addresses young people's existential need for a sense of a projected self beyond the here and now." (Chase 2013:860) These young people need security and to feel safe in the UK. They need to have had good support from as soon as they arrived in the UK and it may be that young people who have

had the benefit of placement in loving and supportive foster families are better able to stand the rigours of the asylum system.

At the time of writing there is a new Immigration and Asylum Bill going through parliament. The proposed changes will make young people in the asylum system yet more vulnerable. Two proposed changes are particularly concerning.

- The Bill proposes differentiating between the care provided to UK Citizen care leavers and care leavers subject to immigration control. This will create a 'two-tier' system and will discriminate against young migrant care leavers regardless of the length of time they have lived in the UK, have claimed asylum or may be victims of trafficking (Refugee Children Consortium 2016a).
- The Bill also proposes new measures to make the removal of refused asylum seekers easier by extending the out-of-country appeals process. This process allows migrants to be removed to countries of origin *before* their appeals have been heard on the assumption that they can appeal their cases from outside the UK. Expecting young people, especially when removed to countries where they have little support, little experience and where there are issues with basic safety seems wrong. (Refugee Children Consortium 2016b).

### **Specialist, local and flexible services:**

Health and social care professionals working with UASC and young ARE care leavers need an awareness of the rapidly changing policy environment these young people live within. Without this, professional skills such as intercultural working, supporting transition from child to adult and in working with trauma and loss will be ineffective. Some of the participants in this study were critical of the care they received from social service staff and some felt that they hadn't received the support they needed either before or after they became ARE.

This admittedly small sample of young people have not received enough support to help them come to terms with traumatic events, the loss of home and family and to equip them to move into adulthood. It has only been the most severely unwell who have been able to access specialist torture and trauma care and the few cases who have been referred to specialist services (one participant, P6, in this study) had to travel from Kent to London as no services were available locally:

*"Counsellor yeah - she's very helpful try how to sleep, about everything she's very helpful. I see Counsellor in London Edgware road – its so far but I have a problem I should go... many times I went with you (voluntary sector support worker) ... after you I went alone and lost the way."*

The numbers of UASC and ARE are not huge<sup>9</sup> but their backgrounds, ages and special needs vary widely. Currently, the local Social Services support

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<sup>9</sup> Local authorities are unsurprisingly reluctant to publicise up to date figures for the young asylum seekers they support but in September 2015 Kent County Council announced they

these children in mainstream services which are heavily stretched due to general public service cutbacks as well as other pressures. A dedicated mental health service for UASC/ARE young people in Kent could develop skills and methods of working with this group.

### **Promoting resilience:**

Many studies of UASC note an impressive degree of positivity amongst these young people who, despite losing home and family, remain eager to build new lives (Wade 2011). They express frustration that they have not been able to make use of their lives and some of our participants focused on coping strategies. P3 for example, was determinedly upbeat. He said *“When I was in prison and detention I never cry, I never be sad – the only reason is I don’t want to be mad – I said let’s be happy let’s be nice friends with the prisoners and in detention. If I want to be happy I put some songs and I will dance – many asylum seekers are always sad and I can understand their feelings but if you stay like that you will become mad and then its very hard to come out – I don’t want to come into the mad.”* P2 (who has secure refugee status) uses other methods to look after himself: *“if I get stressed maybe I go to the pub and have a drink – I call one of my mates ... I tell him about it I say I’m a bit stressed – he gives my advice. So long as you take it out you relax - if I just keep it, it gets more and more and you explode.”*

Inevitably, many young people arriving in the UK as asylum seeking children will be targeted for removal and many will have to return to countries of origin where they fear persecution. This reality should be acknowledged by services, not so that young people can be excluded but so that services can respond to this possibility and do their utmost to ensure that all legal options are explored and that young people are well educated and prepared for whatever the future might hold.

### **Conclusions**

In the course of this study we identified several gaps in services provision for young asylum seeking care leavers. We acknowledge that the Home Office has determined that Appeal Right Exhausted young people have had their asylum cases refused but we argue, and experience shows, that many of these decisions are unsafe and can be over turned. We also know that effecting removal to countries of origin, even when it is voluntary, is a protracted and difficult process. We know from this research and from many other studies that young people who have grown up in the UK and feel that it is their home will resist forced return and will choose destitution in the UK to removal to countries they fear and have feel no connection to. The UK’s increasingly punitive immigration regime will make life very much harder for young people and will make it difficult for statutory agencies to provide the basic support services they need.

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were responsible for 720 young people. On the 13<sup>th</sup> of April 2016, this had risen to ‘about 830’ and that “the continuing duty of care to support those who had reached their 18th birthday brought the number nearer to 1,400.”

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-kent-34139364>

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-kent-36036833>

This project has shown that support for the wellbeing of young people is inadequate either to address the trauma and loss they experienced in countries of origin or while travelling to a safe country or to prepare them for uncertain futures. Support is also lacking to address the challenges to health and wellbeing that result directly from hostile immigration processes. We argue that a new, holistic service based on social prescribing principles is required which would support young people as they challenge deportation, face destitution and continue in their struggle to build their lives in the UK.

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## **Appendix 1**

### **Mind - Young former unaccompanied asylum seeking children in Kent**

The following document is an interim report on a Mind funded project *Exploring the Mental Health and Wellbeing of Young Asylum Seekers Refused Right to Remain in the UK*. Preparatory work began in May 2015 and the Project will be completed by March 2016. The Project team is working with a voluntary sector organisation (Kent Refugee Action Network – KRAN – Charity number 1097886) who work with unaccompanied asylum seeking children and young refugee adults.

Our Project will work with young people who have claimed asylum in Kent as children and who have now turned 18.

The outcomes of the Project will be:

- a needs assessment and an evaluation of how participants feel services based on co-production principles might support them and others in their situation.
- an exhibition to be shown in Kent and in a London venue. Materials for this exhibition will include a film made with the young people's participation and young people's art work, photographs and testimony.

Since commencing the Project, the team have been attending art therapy sessions and other events run by KRAN to meet and get to know the young people who may participate in this project. We have also reviewed relevant academic and policy literature. We have carried a few (4) interviews with young people.

Commencing the second stage of the Project, the research team have engaged a film-maker and artist to work with the young people, to explore their experiences of everyday life and to enquire into how losing support from social services and the threat of deportation to their countries of origin impacts on their mental wellbeing. Interviews explicitly exploring these themes will be carried out alongside the creative elements of the project.

The report that follows will provide context to the study and address some of the challenges we anticipate in carrying out the project.

Quotations from young people we have interviewed are included in the text in italics.

#### ***Terminology and categories***

UK Immigration agencies use a complex range of acronyms and bureaucratic categories to describe the status of migrants in the UK. In this report we will follow these conventions but challenge these labels that tell us little of a young person's individual case. A child seeking asylum in the UK without parents is known as an unaccompanied asylum seeking children (UASC). If after 18, their asylum claim is refused, they become considered appeal rights

exhausted care leavers (ARECL). Generally speaking, UASC are granted discretionary leave to remain in the UK on arrival but this status is reassessed at 18. The Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000 (CLCA) and the Children and Family Act (2014) protects care leavers but all rights and entitlements to support from the state, for example to accommodation and education, are withdrawn if a young person's asylum claim is refused. This means that young people previously in care can find themselves not only refused support from their erstwhile corporate parent (the local authority - LA) but also threatened with destitution, detention and ultimately forced removal to countries of origin.

It is often only when young people reach 18 that they realise they are not like the others and that they are not entitled to work or further study.

### ***UASC in Kent***

UK policy dictates that the LA covering ports of arrival or asylum screening centres have a statutory obligation to look after UASC arriving in their area. Thus, asylum-seeking children separated from parents and family are supported by only a few British LAs. Kent County Council, as the LA which includes the Port of Dover, is therefore responsible for a relatively large number of the UK's asylum seeking children. According to Kent's most recent strategy document, Kent anticipated ending the year to March 2015 with approximately 365 UASC in care, putting UASC at just under 20% of the overall care population<sup>10</sup>. However, the recent increase in numbers of applications has resulted in KCC (as of the 3<sup>rd</sup> of September 2015) caring for 720 unaccompanied children<sup>11</sup>. In early 2013, Kent was responsible for 100 male ARECL and by April 2014 this number had reduced to 80 of whom 21 were considered to have no strong justification for continuing support (Robinson and Williams 2014:12). For reasons of political and professional sensitivity, data on these cases is hard to access and the Home Office's published data does not allow numbers of ARECL to be disaggregated from the general data on adult asylum seekers. This reflects the sharp demarcation between the treatment of refugees determined as either over or under 18 (Crawley 2007).

The UASC population in Kent, as in the rest of the UK, includes girls and young women but they are far fewer than boys and young men and are less likely to be forcibly returned. Girls and boys under 16 are usually fostered soon after arrival in Kent. Being fostered does not mean they will get permanent leave to remain in the UK but living with a family, rather than in supported housing, means that they tend to have better educational outcomes and a greater sense of belonging in the UK.

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<sup>10</sup> [http://www.kent.gov.uk/data/assets/pdf\\_file/0013/32251/Looked-after-Children-and-Care-Leavers-Strategy.pdf](http://www.kent.gov.uk/data/assets/pdf_file/0013/32251/Looked-after-Children-and-Care-Leavers-Strategy.pdf) (Accessed 21/09/15)

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-kent-34139364> (Accessed 21/09/15)



### ***The 'options' for young ARECL people***

Unaccompanied children claiming asylum in the UK have to learn to adapt to their host country while knowing that they may eventually be returned to the country they fled from. If their asylum claims are denied at 18 and if the LA doesn't continue support because of a specific vulnerability, young people can apply for support under the adult asylum system. Accommodation under this scheme will not be provided in Kent. If young people choose to stay in Kent they may be able to live with friends but, by doing so, they step out of state support regimes and may put their friends in trouble for allowing them to stay in publically funded accommodation.

Many young people are detained in one of the UK's 12 Immigration Removal Centres (IRC) before they are removed from the UK and most ARECL will have to report regularly to the Immigration authorities. Reporting can result in young people being detained but *not* reporting means they will be considered to have 'absconded' and therefore in breach of immigration controls and outside the protection of the state. From detention they may be forcibly returned to countries of origin.

*"Two weeks ago, they closed my money, I'm not allowed to work ... no money because I'm 21, they take my house I don't have work I don't have passport I don't have benefit – nothing. ..."*

### ***Existing Research on the Health and Mental Wellbeing of Young (ARECL) People***

International research has established that the mental health and well-being of refugees and asylum seekers is likely to be impaired because of their pre-migration history, the migration journey and the refugee determination process itself (Palmer and Ward 2007, Silove, Steel and Watters 2000, Hodes 2010). Authorities have argued that fear of enforcement agencies, specifically in relation to deportation, documentation and the arbitrariness of decision-making can result in high levels of stress and impaired emotional wellbeing (Hacker et al. 2011). Immigration controls restrict how services treat clients (Bacon et. al. 2010, Steel et. al. 2011) and any therapy is likely to be undermined by the prospect or actuality of detention and/or deportation.

Chase, Knight and Statham's work (2008) recognised the heterogeneity of asylum seeking children and attempted to listen to how young people themselves felt about their emotional wellbeing. Their report identified nine themes including the journey and arrival in the UK, emic understandings of mental health and wellbeing, experience of social work services, education and sources of support. Highly relevant to this research is their discussion of how immigration and legal services impact on wellbeing. Their findings argue that the period when young people were approaching the end of their discretionary leave to remain was particularly stressful. They cite Faith, from Nigeria "I'm afraid, my papers are nearly finished. Before they gave me two years but it finishes in June – I don't want to go back to my country. I think about it every day". A social work professional echoes this: "At age 17½-18, when they know their status is up for review, they start panicking. There is

then an increase of mental health issues, across the board, across all nationalities". (Chase, Knight and Statham 2008:5)

Social workers have been actively engaged with how to support UASC (for example Cemlyn and Briskman 2003; Hayes and Humphries 2004; Kohli and Mitchell 2007) and there is now a substantial national and international literature on the issues facing unaccompanied and separated children and the challenges of providing care and building trust with this vulnerable group (Bhabha, 2004). There is a significant body of literature on the experiences of children arriving in Kent (Matthews 2011; Matthews 2012) and the UK which highlights the bewildering service landscape they face (Bloch and Zetter, 2009; Bloch, Sigona and Zetter, 2014, Chase 2013; Crawley, 2012; Sigona and Hughes 2012). Social work has engaged with topics including how to listen and engage with young people (Kohli 2006), the challenges of practice in local authority settings (Wade 2011), the conduct and ethics of age assessments (Cemlyn and Nye 2012), dominant discourses of racism (Masocha and Simpson 2011 and 2012) and key social work practice concerns relating to pathway planning and assessment (Wade 2011). There is also a literature that focuses on social work practice which argues for more robust and humane methods of working with children (Crawley 2012; Kelly and Bokhari 2012; Robinson 2013). These approaches are critical in safeguarding the rights, mental health and well-being of children (Watters, 2007; Chase, Knight and Statham 2008; Akister, McFarlane, Kaplan and Lawrence 2010; Fazel et al 2012).

This literature has been developed in response to increasingly punitive migration controls and the inherent tension between the Children Act 1989 and the various immigration legislation and instruments which undermine legal protection for children (Bhabha and Crock, 2007; Bianchini 2011; Finch 2012; UNHCR, 2014). Agencies promoting the rights of children have highlighted concerns about the abuse of human rights and high levels of destitution facing UASC (Pinter 2012a and b; Vine, 2013).

The research described in this Interim Report is contextualised by this difficult policy and service setting and seeks to understand something of the effect of living in the state of permanent uncertainty that is the daily life of young people refused leave to remain in the UK.

## ***Interim findings***

Data for this next section draws on the literature outlined above and a small number of face-to-face interviews with young people. In addition, we have drawn on a blog written by a young ARECL person (<http://www.lifeafterdeportation.com/>) and films made by Professor Sue Clayton. Clayton building up the trust of young people over many years and links to these short, open-access films are included as hyperlinks.

We have identified several elements that impact negatively on mental health and wellbeing. These are:

- A sense of being different from their peers
- Not being listened to or understood
- Purposelessness
- Loss – of community, family, future
- Fear - of reporting, detention and forced removal

This list is not exhaustive and issues are cross-cutting, but it will be used to structure the discussion of what we know about the emotional/mental wellbeing of young ARECL asylum seekers. This first clip introduces many of the issues that will be picked up in the interim findings explored below.

<https://vimeo.com/97919876>

### **A sense of being different from their peers**

Mina Fazel's research (2015) found that school provides acceptance, solidarity and recognition for many young asylum seekers but is something some of the young people in this study have had and now lost, or have *never* enjoyed in the UK.

The international literature relating to young undocumented migrants makes it clear that many young people only realise that they are 'not like the others' when they finish compulsory education (Bloch, Sigona and Zetter 2014:37). At this point they have to face that they are not like their peers and that they cannot share the opportunities opening up to others.

The following extract from a blog written by a young person from Afghanistan refused asylum describes this:

<http://www.lifeafterdeportation.com/not-going-to-uni-2/>

The lack of post-18 access to work and education may hit fostered children particularly hard as they may have to leave foster families and, as they have been better integrated in communities than the young people who had been accommodated independently, may have more to lose.

This clip from Sue Clayton's work portrays the experience of a young man fostered happily and securely yet facing the prospect of being returned to Afghanistan.

<https://vimeo.com/couchmode/user28966277/videos/sort:date/98494872>

In some ways Mediwan (in the video clip) has been lucky as he has had the chance to study to 18. Other young people who were judged to have been over 16 at entry to the UK have never been in mainstream school. In Kent, education has been provided by voluntary sector agencies which cannot replicate the experience of school and the sense of belonging and 'normality' that school can engender. At the time of writing, the changes to the compulsory school age made in 2013, are just coming into effect.

An extract from our interview with an ARECL in Kent describes how his hopes of College were dashed by his immigration status (his lack of a 'passport') and his age determination that put him outside compulsory school age:

*"You see I didn't go to College, I went to (name of voluntary sector classroom-based activities). When I come I was 14 they say I was 16. I went to the College – they asked so many questions then they said you don't have a passport and I couldn't go."*

This young man's English was poor and he was illiterate in his mother tongue and in English. He had initiated the contact with the College as, again because he had been judged to be over 16 on arrival, he didn't have a foster family to support him.

### **Not being listened to or understood**

Our interactions and interviews with ARECL show frustration that their experiences and stories are not being listened to carefully or even at all.

*"If someone understands my problem then they can do something about it"*

This young man's complaint was that either he was not believed or that no-one was prepared to try to understand the reasons he had for leaving his home in Afghanistan. He continues:

*"They don't know how I came to this country – one year I was on the way – people die on the way – I saw with my eyes – no-one to help and then you come to some place safe ..."*

He continues, with his friend (in brackets) butting in:

*"I've got problems with that people as well – if they find me out they are not give me a chance. (Those people they are not going to listen to you, they are going to shoot you! Its not like England talking easy you know!) People don't know we've got a problem in Afghanistan ... I've got a really bad problem."*

On arrival there has been insufficient interest in fully exploring young people's asylum claims. Adrian Matthews' research (2012) details the processes young people go through on arrival and, when his report was written, young people were sometimes interviewed before they had had a chance to sleep or eat. Inevitably, mistakes and confused chronologies entered their asylum stories. Any inconsistencies are difficult to change and will be picked up by the Home Office later on to challenge the credibility of the story and thus the young person. Legal advice for young people has also been very poor (see

Matthews 2014 and Warren and York 2014) and there has been a tendency for carers, foster and corporate parents to underestimate the importance of appealing decisions and challenging the discretionary leave to remain that is granted routinely.

### **Purposelessness**

The period before asylum seekers are awarded secure status as refugees has long been recognised as one of liminality and uncertainty. For adult asylum seekers, this period usually runs from arrival to (eventual) protection or removal. ARECL are secure in the UK from when they are accepted as 'looked after children' by LA's but uncertainty and anxiety starts when they reach adulthood. Young people often learn about the system from their peers (either directly or through social media) and they hear rumours of what has happened to others – who has been deported, who has gone 'underground' and who has won an appeal or has a hearing due. Despite this plentiful 'street' knowledge, important decisions, such as choosing a legal representative, making appeals, attending meetings with officials that might lead to detention, are made with little informed or impartial advice. Chase, Knight and Statham quote Mahlet, from Ethiopia who says "I'm just thinking about all the things... like my head is going. I am thinking that my head is going to explode because I'm just thinking". . (2008)

This sentiment is very close to what we have heard from ARECL in Kent:

*"We are going slowly mad"*

*"This is mad making"*

*"Another big problem is that we have so much thinking – to think about that stuff now – we are getting crazy."*

*"We are listening to you – but we are thinking of something else. We have been here 5 or 6 years, just thinking about this stuff – we didn't get anything. We didn't really go to school or college to learn more English."*

Young people talk freely of killing themselves as a means of ending the uncertainty of their existence with only deportation ahead of them.

The young woman in this clip <https://vimeo.com/98494874>

speaks dispassionately about the prospect of suicide. It is something she has clearly considered carefully. Below, we include other examples of young people talking about ending their lives in response to the threat of detention and deportation.

### **Loss – of community, family, future**

All children seeking asylum alone have experienced separation and the loss of family, friends and places where they have childhood memories and for many have felt 'at home', safe and secure. One of Sue Clayton's films addresses this sense of loss of family and community:

<https://vimeo.com/97919874>

while another demonstrates the loss of hope many young people experience:

<https://vimeo.com/98496550>

In addition to this first loss of home and community, some of the young people in this study have experienced loss for a second time. One young man, who had been fostered, told us:

*“I used to live with a Folkestone family I moved from there to Ashford – I grow up with them in a village you just want to be in that village – you have a lot of friends, to chat with them, if you want to go to somewhere you just go – I don’t feel different but sometimes I think about my small brother and my Mum ... I can remember them. My brother was small. My foster family so happy when I come out (of detention) ... I wish I could still live there – she was nice ...”*

Once their support from the local authority is finished they are alone and fearful. We were told:

*“Our life is like – not a human life. We can’t move, we can’t do nothing, we can’t go to college, we can’t work – nothing... we are hiding people.”*

Compounding this, many young people came from families who had invested in them and had sent them away to have safer futures and to one day support their families as adults. Their ambitions for careers to make their lost families proud seem far away.

*“When we were young we were thinking that we were going to be engineer or doctor or those things ... but we are not, we are nothing now.”*

### **Fear of detention and forced removal**

Above all, the young people we spoke to expressed fear. They were fearful of being returned to Afghanistan but also of what was likely to happen to them *before* they were returned home. Deportation has been described as a process (Drotbohm and Hasselberg 2015) and for most people it is anticipated and struggled against for a long time before it happens. Young people turning 18, may first have to deal with the shock that they are vulnerable to deportation. They will have legal appeals and may be required to attend asylum hearings at which they will be tested on their original asylum case and on their current situation. At the same time, their local authority may begin the process of reviewing their support and young people who have been fostered may have to move out of foster homes.

Most ARECL young people have to report regularly to an Immigration reporting centre and the Home Office uses reporting as a way of keeping track on migrants targeted for removal. Young people attending these centres know that they may be detained. Young people talk of the stressfulness of reporting as it can mean an end to liberty and, potentially, the loss of friends and possessions. It is a precursor to forced removal. Stories of reporting and detention are shared and the following extract from field notes describe how one young man’s friend reported and didn’t come back:

*“H. seems to blame himself for W. being deported – he says he knew that the solicitor was no good and he should have found another one for him. He says he told him not to sign on but W thought it would be OK. W. was detained when he went to sign on, detained for a week and then deported. All his stuff is still in the house and H. expects it all to be thrown out when the new person moves in.”*

Most of the young people we have talked to have been detained themselves and/or know about people who have been detained when. They are aware that the Home Office charters return flights so are aware that if one person is detained, it might mean a flight is planned.

*“I have been reporting for about two years. One time I go, they keep me there, they put me in detention for 3 months I talked to my solicitor and my girlfriend help me get out. I was so scared... I was in Dover and then in Gatwick.”*

*“Come to sign and next day they are in Afghanistan – no-one knows what goes on in detention.”*

Living with this sort of acute fear has serious affects on the mental health and emotional wellbeing of young people. One way in which this manifests itself is in sleeplessness and young people told us about their problems sleeping.

*“We are sleeping 4 or 5 o’clock”*

*“We not sleeping at night, we don’t know what to do with our life ‘cos we haven’t got nothing we can’t work we can’t go to college. What we can do – I’m just going to kill myself (bangs table) its really bad – its really difficult to think about this stuff – getting crazy.”*

One of Sue Clayton’s films demonstrates the fear many young people have of being picked up by Immigration and detained and this [clip](https://vimeo.com/98496554) <https://vimeo.com/98496554> shows the lengths people are prepared to go to, to avoid capture.

### **Positive points – Peer support**

Amongst the gloom of these young people’s lives there are some brighter spots. Many are resilient and harbour hope for their futures.

*“We can still do something, I can get my passport and I can do something but now we just ...”*

Their lives do not stop because of their lack of status and they have relationships and start families. One young man we talked to described himself as being married with kids. In fact he had been living with his girlfriend for 3 years and looking after her child from a previous relationship. As he couldn’t work and didn’t have a right to remain in the UK, they couldn’t get married but they live together and he and his partner are a stable family unit. He said: *“I’ve had been looking after that child – he thinks I’m his father – I can’t leave my baby here – its impossible.”*

Naturally they make friends : *“English friends help us learn to speak”* the young people we met had an international and multicultural set of friends

drawn from the diverse groups they had been accommodated with during their stay in the UK.

In addition, ARECL know that, despite the Home Office's best efforts, some of their peers do win appeals and gain rights to remain. Communication and social media is of practical and emotional importance and:

*"When we meet someone we ask if they are on facebook and we can add him and wherever we went, we can talk to him."*

### **Conclusions**

The data and literature presented here provides a very incomplete snapshot of the lives of the young people who are the subject of this research but, along with published literature, our preliminary interviews have given us a baseline to begin the more intensive phase of research. We are aware that there will be many difficulties in engaging young people in discussions of their lives but feel confident that, as the project continues, we will be able to include young people in the co-production of research activities to ensure that the outcomes of this project are relevant to their needs and preferences.

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