



POLICY PROPOSAL

Youth Welfare Officers in British Asylum Accommodation

Supporting the Health and Wellbeing of 18 to 25-year-old asylum seekers



Table of Contents

Overview	02
Why is this needed?	03
What we are proposing	04
Role of the Youth Welfare Officer	05
Case studies highlighting the urgency of action	06

Overview

In view of the commencement of the new Asylum Accommodation and Support Services Contracts (AASC) the Home Office is faced with a unique opportunity to ensure that adequate care and support is provided for 18 to 25-year-old asylum seekers in Britain. We propose that the Home Office, as a matter of urgency, appoint a full time Youth Welfare Officer in every initial accommodation centre, and one Officer in each area where there is dispersal accommodation across the UK.

Why is this needed?

1 Young adult asylum-seekers are vulnerable and exposed to high risks

Young adult asylum seekers in the UK often face unique and complex challenges to their mental health and wellbeing, with many having survived unimaginable experiences within their countries of origin, and/or during their long and treacherous journeys to reach this country. While the UK's approach to safeguarding unaccompanied asylum-seeking and refugee children acknowledges the profound vulnerability of minors in the asylum system and the need to safeguard them from abuse, exploitation, neglect and self-neglect, it must be urgently acknowledged that these vulnerabilities do not end immediately upon reaching adulthood at age 18. Young adult asylum-seekers are often more vulnerable than their under-18 peers since they frequently no longer have access to the guidance, care and support they require^{1,2,3}.

It is widely known that young people seeking asylum are often affected by serious mental health problems, such as post-traumatic stress disorder, sleep disorders, behavioural issues, anxiety, depression and self-harm; with several young lives already tragically lost to suicide in recent years.^{4,5} For 18 to 25-year-olds, the lack of adequate care and support upon arrival in the UK, and throughout the asylum process, risks contributing to a further exacerbation of psychological ill-health amongst young asylum seekers,^{6,7} not least due to social isolation, language difficulties, anxiety about the asylum process, and fears about the future – all of which are major factors that can exacerbate the effects of past trauma.⁸

Young asylum-seeking individuals living in accommodation with older adults are especially vulnerable and at heightened risk of detrimental outcomes such as the aforementioned mental ill-health difficulties and self-harm, in addition to serious risks of abuse, exploitation, disappearance and homelessness. The introduction of a Youth Welfare Officer in all initial and dispersal accommodation for asylum seekers would provide vital support to young people and help to prevent some of the common adverse outcomes resulting from shortcomings in the British asylum system.

2 Children are sometimes wrongfully placed in adult accommodation

Another important reason for the urgent establishment of Youth Welfare Officers is the fact that age-disputed children often end up being wrongfully placed outside of local authority care, in adult accommodation.

The Refugee Council's Age Dispute Project has reported that 89% of the age-disputed young people they worked with in 2017 – all of whom had had an initial decision on age made by Immigration Officers based solely on appearance rather than having an adequate age assessment – were eventually accepted as children.⁹ Official Home Office figures are equally alarming, with one in four asylum seekers (or a total of 705) who claimed asylum as children between July 2016 and June 2017 having been age disputed by the Home Office.¹⁰ 65% of this number were found to be over 18 years of age after an age assessment by the local authority, and were then placed in adult accommodation.

It is well documented that age assessments are risky because of their subjective nature¹¹ and that they lead to failures in safeguarding wrongfully age-disputed children. The only way for a child to challenge their age assessment once completed is through lengthy and complex judicial proceedings which most young people struggle to access.

Age-disputed children who thus end up in adult asylum accommodation are especially vulnerable and require additional care and support which a Youth Welfare Officer could provide. Moreover, support workers have reported that young people are sometimes confused by dispersal and without guidance and support they are at risk. Case studies evidence age disputed children leaving dispersal accommodation to attempt re-entry into initial accommodation, leading to homelessness

1. <https://becomingadultproject.files.wordpress.com/2017/12/ba-brief-5-low-res.pdf>

2. <https://becomingadultproject.files.wordpress.com/2017/12/ba-brief-4-low-res.pdf>

3. <https://becomingadultproject.files.wordpress.com/2017/12/ba-brief-7-low-res.pdf>

4. <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2018/jun/17/suicides-raise-alarm-about-uk-treatment-of-child-refugees-eritrea>

5. <https://www.mind.org.uk/about-us/our-policy-work/equality-improvement/vulnerable-migrants/>

6. <https://www.mind.org.uk/about-us/our-policy-work/equality-improvement/vulnerable-migrants/>

7. http://refugeerights.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/RRE_A-Hostile-Environment.pdf

8. https://www.childrensociety.org.uk/sites/default/files/distress-signals-report_O.pdf

9. The project supported 172 cases in 2017, 41% of which had only had an initial decision of age determined by Immigration Officials rather than through a proper age assessment. Of these, 89% resulted in the young person being later

accepted as a child. https://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/what_we_do/childrens_services/agedisputeproject

10. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/an-inspection-of-how-the-home-office-considers-the-best-interests-of-unaccompanied-asylum-seeking-children>

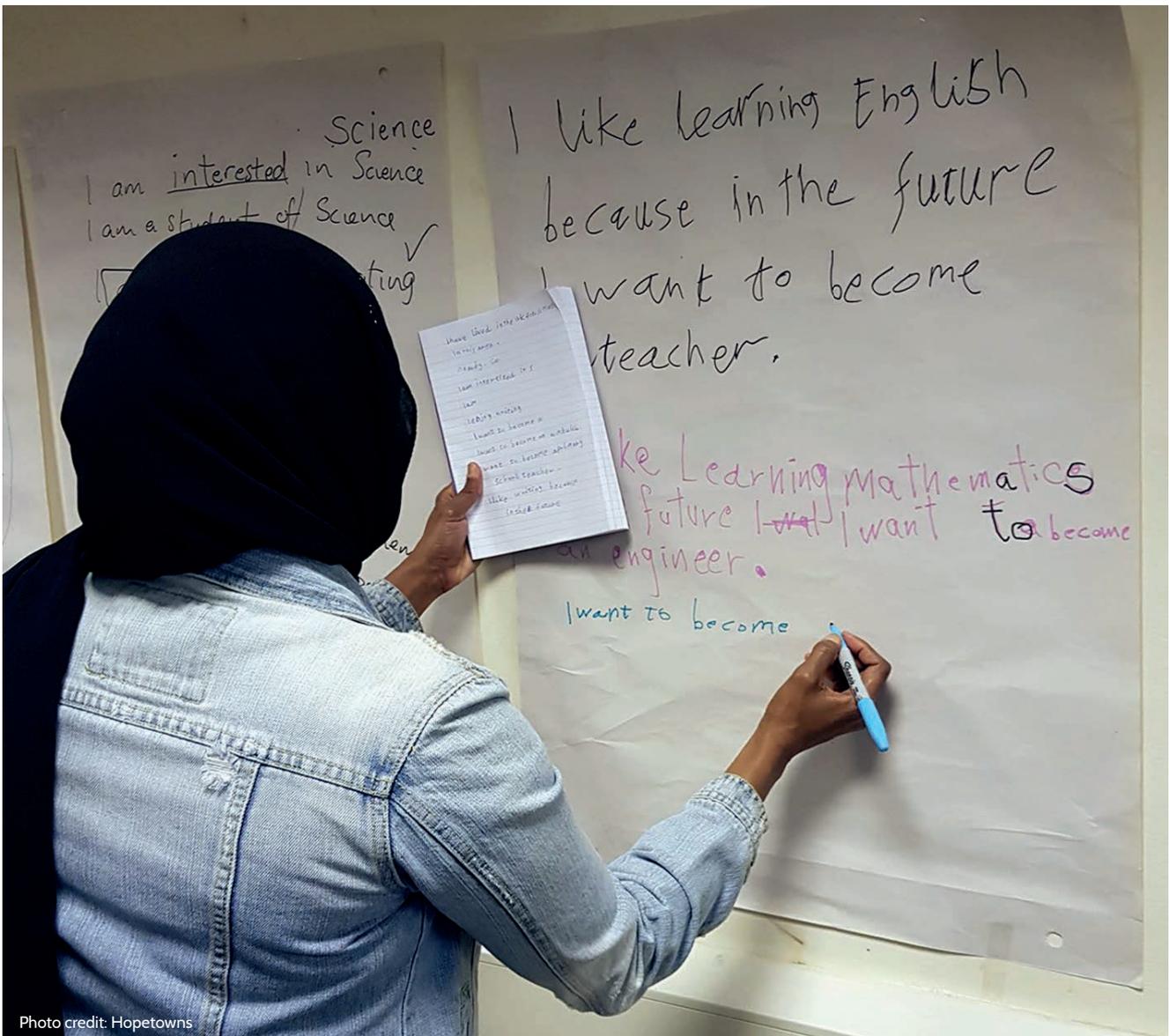
11. Coram Children's Legal Centre. Happy Birthday. Disputing the age of children in the immigration system?. May 2013. https://www.childrenslegalcentre.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/HappyBirthday_Final.pdf pp.8-9.

What we are proposing

We propose that a full time Youth Welfare Officer is urgently placed in all initial accommodation, with one Officer per area where there is dispersal accommodation, to monitor and support the welfare of these young people seeking asylum by providing onsite psychological, emotional, welfare and social support, guidance and information. The Youth Welfare Officers would also liaise directly with individual local authorities whenever they have concerns that an individual may be underage and incorrectly outside of the local authority care system.

The Care Leaver Strategy for England¹², and equivalent policies and provisions in the devolved Governments, acknowledge the difficulties faced by young adults: the struggle of independent living and the need to provide the care, support and guidance that young people would usually receive from their parent or legal guardian¹³.

It is clear that, in light of the often traumatic and challenging experiences of young adult asylum seekers, this group should be considered to have similar support and care needs as young care leavers. Therefore, in a similar spirit, Youth Welfare Officers would provide asylum seeking youth aged 18-25 years with the care and guidance they so desperately need, as is provided to young adults leaving local authority care.



¹² https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/266484/Care_Leaver_Strategy.pdf

¹³ In England, social care for care leavers is legislated under the Children and Social Care Act 2017, in Scotland, the Children (Scotland) Act 1995, in Wales under the Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act 2014 and in Northern Ireland under the Children (Leaving Care) Act (Northern Ireland) 2002. We consider support for care leavers leaving local authority care from 18 until the age of 25 to be an example of good practice and we are suggesting that a Youth Welfare Officer role could fulfil similar support for young adult asylum seekers in asylum accommodation throughout the UK.

Role of the Youth Welfare Officer

The role of the Youth Welfare Officer is very straight forward. He or she would be able to signpost individuals to existing services for guidance, support, and information, and be responsible for the overall safeguarding of young people in adult accommodation. The Officer would be responsible for carrying out a needs assessment for each young adult in the accommodation. This assessment should consider the young person's independent living skills and their ability to manage their own finances, and also assess the need for extra support in navigating the asylum process and (where applicable) age disputes.

Careful consideration should be given to identifying young individuals' emotional and psychological wellbeing needs and ensuring they are referred to expert support organisations as required.

Particular attention must be paid to those young persons who have been age assessed as adults whilst claiming to be minors; especially those with disputed ages considered 'borderline' (ie. where young people who claim to be underage are determined to be 18 or 19).

The Youth Welfare Officer would moreover carry out the following:



Ensure inspection and review of the accommodation, ensuring that age appropriate sleeping arrangements are provided as a priority, i.e. with separate rooms for 18 to 25-year-olds, in line with best practice.



Liaise with Home Office safeguarding teams and asylum support, to ensure that age assessed young persons are identified by the Welfare Officer and given due attention.



Refer all 18 to 25-year-old asylum seeking young persons to local support and advocacy organisations, as well as local activities relevant to them (and assist them where necessary with travel).



Make available guidance on safeguarding procedures for 'age-disputed children' and young people.



Strengthen referral routes to local Child and Mental Health Services (CAMHS) and Adult and Mental Health Services (AMHS).



Photo credit: Hoptowns

Case studies highlighting the urgency of action

The following two case studies illustrate the vulnerability of 'age-disputed children' and young adult asylum-seekers living alone in initial and dispersed accommodation, and the risk to their wellbeing.



1 Case 1: Age dispute and street homelessness

A arrived in the UK alone and was placed in the care of a local authority as an unaccompanied asylum-seeking child. An age assessment by the local authority determined him to be 19-years-old and he was moved from care into initial accommodation in Birmingham.

Although confused about dispersal and why he was being issued with dispersal papers, A was moved to NASS accommodation in East Midlands. He stayed there only briefly before leaving and returning to his initial accommodation, where he attempted to re-access support. A was turned away and began sleeping rough on the streets of Birmingham.

A was referred by staff at St Chad's Sanctuary to the Children's Society, because they were concerned that he was deeply vulnerable. When A met with the Children's Society advisor he was unable to provide a coherent account of his situation, had no understanding of the asylum process and why he was sent to NASS housing and was confused about timescales and dates.

Currently A has been provided with accommodation by a charitable organisation while his case with the Home Office is ongoing. Agencies involved continue to be concerned for A's wellbeing due to: his apparent vulnerability and young age; his lack of understanding of his own experiences; his insecure immigration status and lack of progress on immigration matters.

Without intervention from multiple support agencies, A would still be street homeless, would not be seeking to regularise his status and would be especially vulnerable to exploitation and abuse.

2 Case 2: The tragedy of Alexander Tekle

Alexander Tekle was 17-years-old when he arrived in the UK in the back of a lorry. He was unaccompanied, had been travelling alone for several years from Eritrea, was traumatised and in desperate need of intensive support.

Alex was placed by the authorities in accommodation for adult asylum seekers even though he provided them with the original copy of his baptism certificate and school certificate, listing his date of birth as being that of a 17-year-old. While staying in the accommodation, Alex was beaten up and went missing from the centre. He was later found, homeless and staying with friends in South London, before much later being brought into care after a new age assessment overturned the initial decision. During the period of time in adult accommodation and while homeless, Alex experienced high levels of stress and consumed large amounts of alcohol to cope. Several months later Alexander tragically died. It is believed he took his own life while under the influence of alcohol.

There is an ongoing inquest into Alex's death. The lawyers representing Alex's family hope that the inquest will scrutinise Home Office practice and local authority's support for Alex's best interests and identify any failures in his care.

In an interview with the Guardian,¹⁴ Alex's father, Teclé Sium Tesfamichel, a refugee now living in Sudan, said: *"Alexander is not coming back. But I want to know this doesn't happen to children and young people again. These children, who have to leave home through no fault of their own, are traumatised on their journey through the desert and the sea. It is the job of the authorities to look after and guide these children, who come to the UK alone. They shouldn't come to die."*



Photo credit: Meena Centre

¹⁴ Amelia Gentleman, Suicides raise alarm about UK's treatment of child refugees, The Guardian, 17 June 2018, <<https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2018/jun/17/suicides-raise-alarm-about-uk-treatment-of-child-refugees-eritrean>>

www.refugeerights.org.uk

| info@refugeerights.org.uk

| @Refugee_RE