

The Needs of Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children and Young People Living in London

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Foreword from the Peer Researchers

This research has been and will be an important part of my journey throughout my life as an asylum seeker in the United Kingdom. It's a research that will relate to every young asylum seeker as it was done by us, by the young people who are and were asylum seekers, and I'm sure once you will read it, there will be a part of you going through the asylum system.

Actually, it was a word during the research that stuck with me. We were ready to do the interviews with young people, but instead of using the word 'interview', we decided to call it research conversations. Why? Because every asylum seeker is and was fed up with interviews, even scared of an interview so that's why we decided to call it a conversation. So imagine if you are scared of an interview, what else asylum seekers were scared of that not everyone knew. Hopefully, the findings from these research conversations will bring lots of things to light so we can rely on the right people to help and make the best of it.

The main reason why I decided to be part of this research was that I had an opportunity to really be part of something that might change the way of the asylum process. It was a dream that has become a reality and I'm glad that I shared my ideas on this research. But also, I had lots of people supporting me from the South London Refugee Association (SLRA) and Ilona and Helen were there every step of the way. Last thing I would say is, let's make this dream of ours have the best happy ending for people who are vulnerable.

Gersi, peer researcher

Why is participatory research important? If university researchers were doing this alone, you don't feel the way but involving people with experience will make you *feel* and *understand*. For me, it was a great opportunity. As a young researcher, I've been through the same experience and I understand very well what unaccompanied young people go through, the social services and the asylum-seeking process. We had a couple of sessions with the young people's advisory group to help prepare the questions for interviewing. I was a part of the research team as a young researcher with Helen, Ilona and Gersi. We interviewed the young people at the LSE, at SLRA and at the local authorities – wherever they chose. We then had another session with the advisory group, updating them on how the interviews went and the outcome of the research. Together we came up with suggestions for how things to be better.

My favourite part was when we were preparing the questions because from my own experiences that time when I was young, when I was going through being in care or going through asylum, I didn't understand. It reminded me how it was really hard to go through the process, not understanding very well, when I didn't speak English. I wish I understood and that I had someone to explain to me, what it means to go through this journey. In the future, I want to become an adviser with young people and I learnt from this research, how to communicate professionally with young people. To be a researcher is a great experience, especially if you are trying to understand the law and how the system works in the UK.

Amina, peer research

Executive Summary

About the Research

This report is about children and young people who are seeking protection from war, persecution and human rights abuses in the UK on their own and are living in London and are looked after by local authorities. The report is based on a participatory research project funded by London Councils and the Association of London Directors of Children's Services. It was conducted by researchers at the Institute of Applied Social Research at the University of Bedfordshire and the Centre for Analysis of Social Exclusion (CASE) at the London School of Economics, in partnership with the South London Refugee Association (SLRA). At the heart of this research is the need to better understand the needs and experiences of unaccompanied children and young people living in London. It centres their thoughts and feelings in relation to their protection, well-being and integration needs and their experiences of systems, processes and professionals across asylum and care systems.

The Participatory Approach to the Research: Young People at the Centre

The research comprised three key ways through which young people with lived experiences of the asylum and care systems were able to shape and inform the research. Firstly, eight young people were involved in the research through a Young People's Advisory Group, which worked collectively to help design the research tools, input into interpreting the findings, and helped to develop the recommendations. Secondly, two young people engaged in the project as Peer Researchers. They received research training and worked alongside the university researchers to conduct 'research conversations' with young people. Thirdly, we conducted 'research conversations' with 15 unaccompanied children and young people between 16-26 years old, including both looked-after children and care leavers from a range of London Boroughs. We used the term 'research conversations' throughout the course of the research rather than interviews. This was decided by the advisory group and the peer researchers. They thought it would reduce the risk of associating the research with formal interviews such as asylum and age assessment. They also considered it was a term that would set the tone for an interactive and human experience for young people where they could feel in control of what to say and not say. These took place between July and October 2024. The research conversation template is included in Appendix C

The Research Findings

The findings from the research have shown that unaccompanied young people's experiences of the asylum and social care systems can vary in different ways, for different reasons and at different points in their journey. Overall, their experiences highlight the need for an asylum system that is much more child-sensitive and that takes a child centred approach to its procedures and outcomes. They highlight the need for asylum procedures and outcomes to be much more focused on protecting children and on protecting their futures. For those whose age was disputed, usually by the Home Office, their well-being was detrimentally affected by the often lengthy and (re)traumatising process of age assessment. It meant having to undertake multiple and intrusive interviews with multiple professionals, amplifying existing trauma, triggering feelings of loss and separation from their families, and in some cases delaying the asylum decision making process. For some, it meant experiencing street homelessness and destitution, being placed in adult accommodation, having no one on their side believing in them and of feeling unsafe and unsupported. For others, they spoke of having the support of local authorities when their age was disputed by the Home Office. Despite the similarly lengthy and adversarial processes, they spoke of the emotional, social and practical support provided by social workers and foster families as a vital layer of protection for their safety and well-being and they highlighted the importance of the dignity of being believed and trusted by these professionals who stood by them.

Young people also spoke of just how common it was for them to have to wait through asylum or age assessment processes, including experiences of being appeals-rights exhausted, and of the long pathway to leave to remain and citizenship.¹ In doing this, they addressed concerns that all these long immigration and asylum processes put their lives, hopes and futures on hold and undermined their mental health, well-being and development rights and their sense of belonging. Their concerns about the stalling impact on their futures echoes other research which has centred the voices of unaccompanied children and young people (Stalford et al, 2022). The young people in this research spoke of their asylum or age assessment outcomes often being left to 'drift' by professionals, such as solicitors, and at times social workers, and

¹ Young people are considered Appeals Rights Exhausted (ARE) when they have no leave to remain in the UK and no further appeal rights or failed to appeal a decision within the timeframe for appeal (although there may sometimes be further avenues for progressing the case that have not been identified). Young people who are ARE are vulnerable to detention and removal.

wanted these professionals to take ownership of the responsibility for ensuring decision-making delays were kept to a minimum and disruptions to their futures minimised.

Almost all young people said they struggled to understand both the asylum process and the social care system, especially upon arrival, and they highlighted difficulties understanding their ‘rights and entitlements’ at different stages of the process. When they arrived, young people did not understand what it meant to go through the asylum process or even what ‘asylum’ meant in some cases. They didn’t know about and were unable to access their rights to support from services at different stages, including the right to access the panel of Refugee Council children’s advisers or a Barnardo’s Child Trafficking Guardian for those who had been exploited. In fact, most highlighted not having a trusted adult to accompany and help them through the asylum process. Some only received this type of support much later in their journey from specialist charity caseworkers, discovered by chance and through referrals from peers rather than through official routes. Some young people, including those who were positive about the social care support they received from their local authorities and had a good relationship with their social workers and/or foster carers, sometimes still struggled with understanding the asylum process. Additionally, they highlighted variability of practices across local authorities when it came to the level and nature of social work support through the asylum process. Many of the young people in the sample highlighted often being left to carry many aspects of the burdens of the asylum process on their own, such as finding solicitors on their own. Where they were supported, they spoke of being helped to find an immigration solicitor, of being accompanied to appointments or of being helped to communicate with their solicitor. Where they were not, they spoke of being given lists of solicitors, of being referred to solicitors or advocacy support organisations by friends and peers, not professionals, or at times, searching for solicitors alone. Young people rarely reported receiving help from their social workers to advocate for expert evidence reports to be commissioned, such as country-of-origin reports or medico-legal reports, receiving help to quality assure the legal advice and representation they were getting, or to help them make decisions when they received an asylum decision most crucially an asylum refusal.

Finally, many of the young people who participated in the research spoke of the challenges to their well-being, integration and belonging and spoke of feeling fearful and unsafe about different aspects of their lives. Some felt fearful of being attacked or bullied due to violence and knife crime in London. Others were very fearful of being removed to places like Rwanda

or of being picked up by immigration enforcement officials and being returned to their home country when they had exhausted their appeal rights. Some were fearful of and had personally experienced racist abuse and attacks. This was the case even before the riots and attacks took place in August 2024, which specifically targeted asylum seekers, people of colour and Muslims. Nevertheless, London was still a place where many of the young people we spoke to felt welcomed and at home, particularly when they had support from and positive relationships with their social workers, key workers, peers, charities and communities. They highlighted the power of relationships and opportunities that prioritised their sense of belonging within spaces of everyday normal life. Many of the young people, even in the small sample of this research, were very motivated to do well in their studies, to find a good job and to give back to their communities in different ways.

The Social and Political Significance of the Report

This report comes at a critical time; one of both opportunity and significant challenge following the recent period of change to immigration and asylum policy, which has seen the rapid introduction of laws and measures that further eroded the protections of unaccompanied children and young people (Royal College of Psychiatrists, 2024). Since the start of this research, the UK has seen a change in government, which provides an important opportunity for systemic policy and practice reforms and to prioritise a child-first approach that is oriented towards unaccompanied children and young people's protection in the broadest sense, including their well-being and development (UNCRC, 2013). The change in government has seen plans to forcibly remove asylum seekers to Rwanda scrapped, which has brought about much-needed relief to young people seeking asylum and living in London, many of whom experience deep anxieties and fears about forced removals and detention. The government has also resumed making decisions in asylum claims that had previously been deemed inadmissible. At the same time, the government has ramped up efforts to forcibly remove asylum seekers who have been refused and have exhausted their appeal rights, including care leavers, even where they may continue to fear for their safety upon return. Local authorities and social workers have to navigate their statutory care and welfare duties towards unaccompanied children and young people through such shifting and restrictive policy imperatives. This creates a complex dynamic where the separate care function of social work gets implicated in the politics and control of the immigration and asylum system to limit the ways in which social workers can protect unaccompanied children, young people and their futures (Hadwin and Singh, 2024).

Additionally, during the summer of 2024, as the research team were undertaking the fieldwork for this research, England experienced racist riots and Islamophobic attacks, many of which expressly targeted asylum seekers, the accommodation they were placed in, places of worship, and the charities and legal representatives that support them across the country including in London. These heightened existing fears and anxieties among the young people that the research team have been working with, both those involved in designing and conducting the research as well as the participants themselves. Young people spoke at length to the researchers in this project about experiences of racism and abuse even before, but their fears and anxieties about their personal safety increased in light of the attacks.

The Recommendations

The combined input from the Peer Researchers, the Young People's Advisory Group and the research participants themselves allowed us to harness ideas based on the unique perspectives of young people to provide recommendations for policy and practice reforms. These are set out in this report, and are focused on central and local government. At the heart of these recommendations is the urgent need for a systems-wide recognition of the particularly vulnerable situation of unaccompanied children and young people. They are framed by a concern for the harms caused by aspects of the current system that are overly determined by immigration concerns rather than on ensuring that children and young people are protected to the maximum extent possible as they arrive through to a durable solution. The recommendations urge the new Government to review its asylum processes and commit to child-friendly and trauma-informed mechanisms and remedies as an important aspect of their stated commitment to the well-being and futures of children and young people. The report also urges local authorities to prioritise practices and approaches that focus on belonging and integration. It urges local authorities to plan for how to meet the asylum and immigration needs of unaccompanied children and young people in their care within individual pathway plans and within local and regional planning, and to build on good practices that promote opportunities for connection and a sense of belonging to people and places to maximise children and young people's well-being and protection.

Below is a summary of the key recommendations developed by the young participants from the research conversations, peer researchers and the young people's advisory group, supported by the research team.

Arrival

1. All children and young people should be assessed by a psychologist to determine how to provide appropriate trauma-informed care from the very beginning that is relevant to their circumstances. They should also have access to ongoing well-being and therapeutic support so they can get it when they need it.
2. No child or young person should have to face questioning from the police or immigration officials upon arrival. The priority should be protection and allocating children and young people a safe place to rest over and above any other concerns.

Guardianship

3. Children and young people need independent legal guardians from the start and throughout their journey who understand the asylum, immigration, modern slavery and social care processes, who understand the unique challenges that young people face, and who is accessible to young people.

Rights and entitlements

4. All children and young people should receive age-appropriate information about their rights in a format that is accessible to them, in their language at the beginning when they arrive, when they go into care as well as throughout their journey, and not just given information when something happens to them.
5. Social workers to explain to children and young people about what it means to be a corporate parent and what their parent-like duties are in this role. Social workers should explain that they have parental duties.

Social Care

6. As corporate parents, and as any parent would, social workers and personal advisers should be involved in supporting children and young people through the asylum process, such as making sure they understand the process, that they have a good solicitor and someone they trust to attend appointments with them. They should explain children's rights and entitlements throughout the asylum journey or ensure that an expert has explained these things to them in a way that is accessible. They need to oversee the professionals involved in the asylum journey to ensure that the proper procedures are being followed and that their child is getting the best service,

as any parent would. All young people need someone to keep what is best for their future in mind.²

7. Social workers should familiarise themselves with the profiles, histories and experiences of all children and young people and be consistently prepared before meeting them for the first time. The responsibility to inform the social worker should not be on young people.
8. The law should ensure ongoing care and support for young people up to the age of 25 years no matter what the young person's education or immigration status is. It is often not a young person's fault if they are out of education or haven't regularised their status - this can happen because of poor support from different professionals in the past and delays in the asylum system.
9. All social workers, personal advisors, and other social care professionals should respond to young people in a way that shows they are taking ownership of them and to demonstrate parental responsibility.
10. Social services need to consistently provide support for integration and belonging to unaccompanied young people, to prevent loneliness, especially upon arrival. These young people are often very isolated and separated from families and loved ones. They need support from professionals to overcome this and to protect them from other dangers like racism and violence.
11. Social workers and personal advisers are encouraged to take greater responsibility for the information needs of children and young people (linked to recommendation 4).
12. There should be 'knowledge departments' or regional hubs of excellence and support for training and advice for social workers and personal advisors. This would enable professionals to gain peer support and local authority swapping opportunities for social workers to learn about what is happening and get support.

Asylum and international protection

² In developing recommendations for social work, young people were not suggesting that all unaccompanied young people have negative experiences of social work. Rather they were highlighting the importance of good social work practice for positive outcomes, what good practice looks like, and the importance of all young people experiencing good practice to ensure positive outcomes for all. As you will see in the findings, young people spoke of having variable experiences.

13. The government should take the asylum and international protection decision-making away from the Home Office and give it to independent professionals who know about children and children's circumstances.
14. The asylum decision-making process for children should be trauma-informed and attentive to the grief and loss experienced by child asylum seekers; it should be geared towards the ways in which children understand their lives and circumstances prior to leaving their country of origin rather than being adult-centric, politically and historically focused.
15. Decision-making processes should be faster so that children and young people do not have to spend years waiting to secure their status. But this needs to be done so that young people have enough time to properly prepare for appeals and get good legal representatives. It is not fair that children have 14 days to lodge an appeal, but the Home Office can take years to make a decision on the young person's case.
16. Young people should have the right to work and be supported to go to university in the same way as their peers, so that they can move on with their lives while they wait for an asylum decision (see best interests leave below). These would help young people to integrate as well as helping to empower them with skills and knowledge needed for their future.

Following the in-depth participatory process of supporting young people to develop recommendations, the research team have built on these to make further key policy recommendations below. This is not to diminish young people's important contributions but rather to build on them to maximise the impact of the report:

Policy Recommendations

1. The Government should introduce a system of independent legal guardianship for all unaccompanied / separated children. This should happen promptly, from the moment they come into contact with any authority, and last until a durable solution is reached, even if that extends beyond their childhood.
2. Children should only be subject to age disputes where there is a significant reason to doubt their age and as a measure of last resort where other approaches have been exhausted. Limit Home Office age determinations, and decisions to treat young people asserting they are children as adults on arrival to very exceptional cases (e.g.

evidence they are in their late 20's). Where age assessments are conducted as a measure of last resort, appropriate support for the young person should be in place.

3. Children and young people seeking international protection need to be provided with a form of protective leave to remain, meaning being granted secure immigration status as soon as they enter care and having a long-term plan for their recovery and development. This must be based on an individual assessment of each child's best interests taking into account the child's views, needs and concerns, their immediate safety as well as their long-term best interests. A child's best interests should be understood within the whole framework of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989)
4. All children in care should receive early intervention and proactive support from their social workers to ensure they can realise any rights to nationality or permission to stay, and this should be central to the care plan and pathway planning process. Despite the existing legal framework placing duties on local authorities that include providing support to resolve nationality and immigration status, there is nonetheless a need for a more clearly articulated duty to ensure this happens consistently. This could be achieved through amending the Care Planning, Placement and Case Review (England) Regulations 2010. Further to this, statutory guidance should be amended to include more detailed guidance for social work practitioners on *how* to meet these duties.
5. All children and young people who are in the asylum and immigration system should have timely access to free, expert legal representation which is child-centred and receive the holistic support they need to be able to engage effectively with their legal case. As corporate parents, local authorities have a duty to ensure this, but the Ministry of Justice needs to ensure that looked-after children's entitlement to legal aid is accessible in practice by fixing market failures that result in too few immigration lawyers being available. The Ministry of Justice should also extend eligibility for immigration legal aid to care leavers.
6. To prevent former unaccompanied asylum-seeking care leavers facing destitution and risks of exploitation and other harms when their support is terminated:
 - a. They should receive ongoing section 23C support with no education / training requirements up to the age of 25 years.

- b. Support under the Children Act (1989) (and equivalent legislation in Scotland and Northern Ireland) should be removed as a category of assistance that can be denied under Schedule 3 of the Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act, (2002)
- c. However, if there is a decision to terminate Children Act support for any former asylum-seeking care leaver either without immigration leave or with limited leave, it cannot be taken without the Local Authority first supporting the young person to secure legal representation in any immigration or asylum claim they could make.
- d. Relevant Home Office funding should be extended to resource Local Authorities to continue their support beyond a young person's 21st birthday and up to their 25th birthday.

Background

Unaccompanied children and young people in London

London boroughs have a long history of providing sanctuary and home to thousands of children and young people fleeing from war, persecution, exploitation, modern slavery, and other human rights abuses on their own. In recent years, London boroughs have supported around a third (29% between 2019-23) of all unaccompanied asylum-seeking children³ looked after by local authorities in England. During this time, unaccompanied children made up around 16% of all looked-after children in London boroughs – higher than the 7% average for England (analysis of CLA data, Department for Education, 2023).

Since the introduction of the National Transfer Scheme (NTS), initially set up as a voluntary mechanism to transfer the care of children from one local authority to another in response to rapidly increasing numbers of children arriving in port authorities in 2015-16, the numbers of children being looked after by London authorities has generally increased. Aside from the London Borough of Croydon, which saw its numbers of looked-after unaccompanied children significantly reduce (from 445 in 2011 to 103 in 2023) and to a lesser extent Hillingdon (from 125 in 2011 to 94 in 2023) most other London authorities have seen the numbers of unaccompanied children in their care rise (Department for Education, 2023).

In addition to looked-after children, London boroughs also support care leavers who claimed asylum as unaccompanied children. For some care leavers, their status upon turning 18 becomes more complicated as they legally become adults if their asylum claims remain pending, they are appealing a refusal of status or they become ‘appeal rights exhausted’ at the end of their asylum claim. Upon turning 18, young people who have not been granted refugee status, humanitarian protection or discretionary leave, are often also restricted from various opportunities, such as apprenticeships and employment, and mainstream support, like social security benefits including housing benefit, and student finance for university, which their peers are able to access. For example, care leavers who are subject to immigration control

³ ‘Unaccompanied asylum-seeking child’ – sometimes denoted by the acronym ‘UASC’ - refers to a child under 18 years who is claiming asylum in the UK in their own right, are outside their country of origin and separated from parents or legal guardians, and are not being cared for by an adult who, by law or custom, is responsible for doing so.

and have no recourse to public funds (NRPF) are not permitted to access named public funds for immigration purposes⁴. ‘Public funds’ refer to most income-based benefits like Universal Credit, and housing support, such as Housing Benefit and social housing. Most care leavers who are British citizens, those who have a settled status like Indefinite Leave to Remain or those who have been granted leave to remain with recourse to public funds, can access social security benefits and employment as they transition to adulthood and obtain financial independence. However, care leavers who are still awaiting their status determination or who have become ‘appeal rights exhausted’ are restricted from employment and mainstream benefits by NRPF restrictions, and therefore are at risk of destitution unless they continue getting support from their local authority after leaving care (Ayre et al, 2016). The NRPF Network’s annual report (2024) reported that there were 521 care leavers with no recourse to public funds⁵ being financially supported across London at the end of March 2023, though there were 1,465 open cases at this time. According to these figures, the majority (64%) were asylum seekers or those who had exhausted their appeal rights. However, this data is limited to less than half (15) of London boroughs who report their figures to the NRPF Network. As part of this research, the research team was able to obtain disaggregated data provided to us by the Department for Education through a Freedom of Information (FOI) request giving breakdowns of the number of care leavers aged 17-21 years old who were former unaccompanied asylum-seeking children, broken down by English local authorities. Analysis of this data showed that between 2019-23, on average a third (33%) of all the former unaccompanied asylum-seeking child care leavers for England were in London boroughs, with a fifth 21% in outer London boroughs and 13% in inner boroughs. This represents over 3,600 care leavers each year on average living in London boroughs over those years (see Appendix A: Analysis of DfE data on care leavers, Table 1 for further details). The South East region had the second highest number of former unaccompanied child care leavers at 2,238 (21%) followed by the East of England at 1,346 (12%). Although it is not entirely clear whether these figures represent all care leavers being supported by local authorities

⁴ This is set out under Section 115 of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999 and paragraph 6 of the Immigration Rules

⁵ This refers to care leavers who are subject to immigration control and are not permitted to access named public funds for immigration purposes set out under Section 115 of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999 and paragraph 6 of the Immigration Rules. ‘Public funds’ refer to most income-based benefits like Universal Credit, and housing support, such as Housing Benefit and social housing. While care leavers who have access to public funds, such as British and settled care leavers or those who have been granted leave to remain with recourse to public funds, can access social security benefits and employment as a means of obtaining income for subsistence, care leavers with no recourse to public funds can become destitute unless they continue getting support from their local authority after leaving care.

financially or through housing provision, the data is still useful in highlighting that London boroughs may be supporting or in contact with a disproportionately higher number of former unaccompanied child care leavers as compared to other English regions.

Policy and legal context

Under the Children Act 1989 – the key legislative framework for supporting and accommodating all children including unaccompanied asylum-seeking children – local authorities have a general duty under Section 17 to safeguard and promote the welfare of children who are found to be in need within their area by providing services appropriate to those children's needs. Unaccompanied children who are seeking asylum in the UK are usually accommodated under Section 20 of the 1989 Act, though some may be looked after under a Section 31 Care Order or other arrangements. Under these provisions, they are entitled to the same support as any other looked-after child, though their collective and individual needs often vary in some significant ways, including their need to regularise their immigration status through the asylum process, their need for support that takes account of the language barriers they often face and other needs related to their experiences of forced displacement, human rights abuses, family bereavement and separation, and related trauma. The way in which support is to be provided by local authorities is set out in the general statutory guidance, supplemented by the 'Care of unaccompanied migrant children and child victims of modern slavery' (Department for Education, 2017a) which was first published in 2014 and later updated in 2017 as part of the previous government's Safeguarding Strategy for unaccompanied asylum seeking and refugee children (Department for Education, 2017b). There has been no further strategy developed for this purpose since.

Like other looked-after children or children found to be in need under Section 17 of the Children Act 1989, unaccompanied asylum-seeking children are owed a range of duties from statutory agencies. Within this context there is limited systematic evidence on the extent to which these duties are actively applied to unaccompanied children consistently as compared to other looked-after children or whether children experience any differential or discriminatory treatment. In some respects, differential treatment is necessary because unaccompanied asylum-seeking children have a unique need to resolve their immigration and asylum status, which is central to their welfare needs and is linked to securing best outcomes for children. However, it is not clear how or to what extent local authorities understand or can

effectively operationalise their duties towards unaccompanied children with respect to acquiring a secure and permanent immigration status or British citizenship.

As any looked-after children, they have a right to an Independent Advocate (IA) – a child rights advocate – if they need to make a complaint about the care and support they receive or if they need help in making any representations to the local authority. Children may also be provided with an Independent Visitor (IV) to help them overcome isolation and build their independence, while they are under 18. Furthermore, some unaccompanied children are likely to experience abuse and exploitation and require specialist interventions, such as receiving the support of an Independent Child Trafficking Guardian (ICTG), as set out in the Modern Slavery Act 2015, and delivered through a Home Office-commissioned service through Barnardo's in England. However, existing evaluations of the effectiveness of the ICTG service focus mostly on how the service works when children are eligible and already have access to a guardian. But not all children and young people with experiences of exploitation will be identified and or referred to this statutory service (Kohli et al, 2019), as is highlighted in this report.

Unaccompanied children who are seeking asylum in the UK must also go through the asylum process to have their international protection claim considered in order to be granted a protection status such as refugee status, which comes with a grant of leave to remain in the UK for a time-limited period. This involves a process of evidence submissions to, and interviews with, Home Office officials who consider whether their circumstances and experiences amount to having a well-founded fear of persecution because of race, religion, nationality, social group and political opinion, as set out in the 1951 the Refugee Convention. Children who are not found to have Convention grounds for protection may have other human rights-based grounds for protection or be given a temporary status such as 'UASC Leave' to remain in the UK for a short period of time. Home Office guidance to caseworkers – 'Children's asylum claims' – sets out how children's claims should be processed and the different outcomes or statuses that children can obtain through the asylum determination process (Home Office, 2020). A key duty which promotes children's safety and welfare in the asylum context is that set out under Section 55 of the Borders, Citizenship and Immigration Act 2009 which requires the Home Secretary to make arrangements for ensuring that immigration, asylum and nationality functions are discharged having regard to the need to safeguard and promote the welfare of children who are in the UK (Home Office, 2009).

Additionally, the Home Office commissions dedicated support provided to unaccompanied children to help them understand the asylum process, principally through the Home Office-commissioned Independent Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children Support Service (IUSS) provided by the Refugee Council in England. According to government guidance, the role of the Refugee Council's Children's Panel is to advise and assist unaccompanied children through the asylum process and to support them in their interactions with the Home Office and other central and local government agencies such as local authorities. The guidance also states that all unaccompanied children in England must be referred to the Refugee Council Panel of Advisers within 24 hours of the first encounter. There is also an obligation on the decision-making team to do this, if there is no record that this has been done sooner. Where individuals have had their age disputed, 'cases must always be referred to the panel unless the claimant is considered to be significantly over 18 and is being treated as an adult in line with the assessing age policy'. Advisers cannot provide legal advice to children, but they do have the authority to act as a responsible adult (Home Office, 2020). However, while there is a requirement on Home Office staff to refer children to the Refugee Council, this is not a statutory duty and there is no duty or requirement on local authority staff such as social workers or personal advisers to refer children to the Refugee Council. Similarly, there is no duty for them to be referred to the Independent Child Trafficking Guardians service. In practice, given the absence of specific monitoring data, it is not possible to know to what extent children are being referred for this type of support.

The policy framework for advocacy provision to unaccompanied children is different in other nations; in Scotland and Northern Ireland, separated and unaccompanied children are referred to a legal guardian who works with children and young people. Guardians support young people by helping them navigate the immigration and care processes; help their interactions with the Home Office, local authorities and other agencies; and help them to 'feel supported and empowered throughout the asylum process' (Home Office, 2020). Such referrals are made by both the Home Office and local authorities.

Children will engage with various other professionals relevant to the asylum and care processes, such as foster carers, virtual school heads, immigration and community care solicitors, professionals involved in age assessments and judicial proceedings, roles which have been explored in detail in other studies (Finch, 2014; Crafter et al, 2021; Gregg, 2015).

Details on all these functions have not been provided, however, many will be covered in the chapter on findings based on young people's own views and experiences with respect to their protection, integration and well-being.

Recent reforms

In recent years, since 2020, the policy and legal context for unaccompanied children and young people seeking asylum in the UK has changed dramatically. Policy and legislative changes enacted through the Immigration Rules – a form of secondary legislation – as well as through primary legislation such as the Nationality and Borders Act 2022 (NABA22), the Illegal Migration Act 2023 (IMA23) and the Safety of Rwanda Act 2023 have affected and continue to affect children and young people in a range of ways, including in how young people's asylum claims are processed and how their welfare is safeguarded. Since the general election in July 2024, the new Labour government has scrapped plans for forced removals to Rwanda and has said that it will not implement further provisions contained within the Illegal Migration Act 2023. However, it has not committed to repealing all the recent reforms made under the Conservative Government, and some existing provisions and uncertainties remain in place. As a result, although existing powers and duties on local authorities under the Children Act 1989 and the safeguarding duty on the Home Secretary under Section 55 of the Borders, Citizenship and Immigration Act 2009 remain in place, these developments have added to existing confusion and misunderstanding about the ways in which children should be accommodated, supported and safeguarded, and the way in which their rights to international protection are secured. For example, while the IMA23 established a power for the Home Office to accommodate unaccompanied children, this was never brought into force and therefore cannot be used in practice. Indeed, as per the High Court ruling, since 31 January 2024, the Home Office no longer provides temporary accommodation to unaccompanied children (Home Office, 2024).

Nevertheless, at the time of writing this report, the power remains on the statute, with the potential for confusion about existing practice and intentions. However, we recognise that the Border Security, Asylum and Immigration Bill is due to repeal this power, meaning that there will be no transfer of power from Local Authorities to the Home Office, and the accommodation and support of unaccompanied children will still be the responsibility of Local Authorities. This proposed Bill will also scrap other key provisions of the Illegal

Migration Act (2023) which posed a significant risk to the safety and welfare of unaccompanied children and young people, such as child detention powers and penalising unaccompanied children for refusing so called 'scientific' methods of age assessments (Community Care 2025; RMCC 2025).

Separately, the suspension of decision-making on all asylum claims of people who arrived on or after 7 March 2023 due to changes under the IMA23 meant a whole cohort of unaccompanied children and young people experienced significant delays and uncertainty over their future until decision-making resumed in summer 2024. Furthermore, although unaccompanied asylum-seeking children were in theory protected from changes to the inadmissibility procedures, implemented through the Immigration Rules in 2022 and developed through the NABA22, which affect adults and children claiming asylum with their families, some unaccompanied children will still be affected when their age is disputed. In recent years, a significant number of children were treated as adults by the Home Office (if they were considered to be 'significantly over the age of 18') but later found to have been children following a local authority age assessment (Dorling et al, 2024). Therefore, risks remain that many age-disputed children will be affected by inadmissibility procedures, and thus liable for detention and forced removals. Moreover, by retaining S 59 of the Illegal Immigration Act 2023, the Government is expanding its list of 'safe countries' from which claims can be deemed inadmissible irrespective of any asylum and human rights grounds. Whilst unaccompanied children are protected from automatic removal under S4 of the same Act, this will have a significant impact on age disputed and mis-age assessed children, including those vulnerable to and with experiences of human trafficking (MICLU 2025; Barnardos 2025).

Additionally, reforms to the age assessment process under NABA22 - not yet implemented - incorporated so-called 'scientific assessments' such as the radiography of molars and bones and magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) scans, to assess the age of maturation. Child rights advocates and medical professionals have argued that children in this context will be unable to give informed consent and that such procedures are statistically unreliable in determining age while being of no therapeutic benefit to the child. As such, this approach has been severely criticised on ethical and reliability grounds by paediatricians, child rights advocates and other experts (RCPCH, 2023; Rowland & Solomon, 2023; Children's Commissioner of England, 2023). Whilst the Government does not produce disaggregated data on the numbers

of children wrongly treated as adults by the Home Office, making it difficult to determine just how many children would be rendered vulnerable through these proposed changes, recent FOI data collected by The Helen Bamber Foundation illustrates the significance of the proposed changes. Freedom of Information requests for January to June 2024 showed that 63 Local Authorities in England and Scotland received 603 referrals to their children's services department of young people who had been sent to adult accommodation / detention. Of the cases when a decision on age was made, 53% were found to be children, meaning that in just 6 months at least 262 children had been wrongly placed in adult accommodation or detention placing them at significant physical and psychological risk (Dorling 2025).

Finally, the IMA23 introduced significantly expanded detention powers, which also pertained to unaccompanied children. The British Association of Social Workers (BASW) have previously expressed their concern about the detention of unaccompanied children under the IMA23 (BASW 2023). These had not been commenced at the time of the research, and the government has since committed to repealing some detention powers. However, the Labour Government's moves to increase immigration detention capacity and enforced removals since summer 2024, have raised significant fears among unaccompanied young people and their advocates. Between July and November 2024, the Home Office increased the enforced removal of foreign national offenders and asylum seekers who had been refused asylum by nearly 30% from the same period last year. Care leavers who arrived as unaccompanied children from certain targeted countries are particularly vulnerable to forced removals, especially if they have not received any or good quality legal advice and representation (Matthews, 2014; Gregg & Williams, 2016). The damage done to unaccompanied children and young people of detention and forced removals is well documented in other studies (Chase, 2016; Chase & Allsopp, 2020; Ehnholt et al., 2018; Greater Manchester Immigration Aid Unit, 2023).

Why this research has been commissioned

The above-mentioned challenges come on top of existing challenges that predate the recent reforms. These include the provision of effective care and protection to children, problems with mis-age assessment, the availability of accommodation and foster carers for looked after children, the over-representation of unaccompanied children in unregulated accommodation, the availability of sufficient funding to local authorities in meeting the needs of

unaccompanied children and young people, the challenges with access to legal advice and representation, the challenges of transitions to adulthood, and long delays in asylum decision-making. Many of these challenges have already been explored extensively through other research (Chase & Allsopp, 2020; Stalford et al, 2022; 2023; Chase et al, 2022; Crafter et al, 2021). However, thus far, limited attention has been paid to the perspectives of children and young people in London in particular, given the unique circumstances and challenges of this region and in the aftermath of recent reforms

The importance of the child-first emphasis of this research cannot be overstated. It is known from frontline practice that the policy and legislative changes in recent years have already had and continue to have a significant and disproportionate impact on unaccompanied children and young people's experiences. They risk limiting their futures, mental health and emotional well-being. It is also known that the politics and policy objectives of the asylum and immigration system have far-reaching consequences for social work practice with unaccompanied children and young people. These objectives not only frustrate the ways in which social workers can prioritise children and young people's welfare throughout immigration and asylum processes, but they can also affect the extent to which social workers are able to enact their professional values, ethics and personal motivations to care for unaccompanied children and young people (Hadwin and Singh, 2024). This context is further compounded by a landscape that sees insufficient funding given to local authorities by the Home Office to provide specialist care for unaccompanied children as looked after children with distinct needs, in addition to insufficient funding to support unaccompanied young people as they leave care or become appeals rights exhausted (East Midlands Council, 2024; House of Commons, 2019)

Against this landscape, and building on an internal review and existing research with professionals conducted by London Councils, this research therefore aims to capture the voices and experiences of young unaccompanied asylum seekers in London. It utilised a participatory approach working with young people to find out how their experiences of the asylum process and social care impact their sense of protection, well-being and integration, and the extent to which they feel welcome and a sense of place and belonging in London.

Methods

The research questions for this project were:

- What are unaccompanied asylum-seeking children and young people's experiences of the asylum and immigration system and experiences of care and protection (including of the National Transfer Scheme, being mis-age assessed and the effects of the Illegal Migration Act (2023))?
- What do unaccompanied young people think about their needs in relation to well-being, protection, and integration?
- What can services learn from young people about how best to deliver their services to respond to their needs and circumstances?

Participatory, trauma-informed approach

To answer these questions, the research utilised a participatory, trauma-informed research approach reflecting wider literature and practices that acknowledge the positive relationship between the participation of young people, including trafficked, exploited and forced migrant children, within policy and practice structures and their protection and well-being (Newman, 2004; Bovarnick et al, 2018; Connolly, 2014; 2015; Hynes, Connolly, Duran, Matar and Durr 2022; Shankley et al, 2023; Aisha et al, 2024). This approach further acknowledges that children and young people should be seen as survivors and active participants in creating solutions, and not just as victims and problems (Machel 2009). The research also utilised Lundy's model of participation to ensure that young people had the space, voice, audience and influence opportunities (2007) to make their involvement meaningful beyond 'voice' alone, and young people's dignity was centred throughout the research process.

In order to provide these opportunities to co-create and co-develop the research with young people, we used three participatory elements:

- Young Person's Research Advisory Group (8)
- Peer Researchers (2)
- Semi-structured Research Conversations with Unaccompanied Young People as Research Participants (15)

Advisory group and peer researchers

With the support of the research partner for this research, the South London Refugee Association (SLRA), the research first established a Young Person's Research Advisory Group. SLRA has been providing services to unaccompanied asylum-seeking children and care leavers across London and were a vital partner for the meaningful participation of young people in the advisory group and peer researchers. The advisory group comprised eight (8) young people with lived experience of the asylum and care process and living in London..

Through two interactive workshops and a Youth Summit hosted by SLRA in May 2024 in the early stages of the project, the university researchers built rapport with the advisory group and peer researchers, explored the key principles and approaches used in participatory research and develop a shared understanding of the key concepts that the research would use in relation to well-being, protection and integration. After this, the university researchers and peer researchers worked collaboratively with the advisory group in a workshop to develop the questions which would form the interview / research conversation schedule used to gather the qualitative data from young participants recruited separately. The peer researchers received additional training on the principles, ethics and practices of participatory research, and worked closely with the university researchers in refining the interview schedule. They were also paired with the university researchers to conduct research conversations with young participants, where consent was given for peer researchers to be involved, and were involved in supporting the running the workshops with the advisory group.

After the field work was near completion, another workshop was held in September where the advisory group was then involved in interpreting (not analysing) the research findings and developing recommendations. The research also worked flexibly with advisory group members, providing one-to-one opportunities for them to hear about the project and provide their input, where they could not join the group sessions. A final workshop was held with the advisory group, peer researchers and some of the research participants in October, where key recommendations were discussed and prioritised and these are set out in this report.

Qualitative data collection sample

The third part of the research methodology involved conducting research conversations with 15 unaccompanied and former unaccompanied asylum-seeking children and young people

aged between 16-26 years old living across London boroughs. They were recruited through local authorities with the support of London Councils, and through the research partner SLRA. To get a range of perspectives, the research employed a sampling strategy that would incorporate the perspectives of young people being supported and accommodated by a range of local authorities as well as different profiles of children by age, gender and nationality. For example, the research ensured that young people supported by both inner and outer London boroughs were included, and that authorities with a different political control, and those with larger and smaller numbers of unaccompanied young people were also included. At the same time, given the small sample size, the research did not aim to enable comparisons between young people supported by different boroughs. Instead, it allowed for opportunities to examine in depth variance in practices and how some forms of support were helpful or not to young people. Where peer researchers were involved in paired interviews with the university researchers, careful attention was paid to ensuring that they were not known to participants.

Qualitative data analysis

The 15 research conversations were individually transcribed and each were thematically analysed through a process of immersive and careful reading and re-reading (Braun and Clarke, 2006) A hybrid deductive and inductive approach was applied to the thematic analysis by using the semi-structured research conversation framework developed with the young person's research advisory group and peer researchers to thematically code and sub-code, using the questions and prompts of the research conversations. This was complemented with an open-coded approach that allowed themes to emerge directly from the data.

The reciprocity between this code-driven and data-driven approach was a good fit with the participatory methodology at the heart of the research. This hybrid approach to the thematic analysis of the research conversations allowed for the voices and priorities of the young person's research advisory group and peer researchers as well as the voices and experiences of young people who participated in the research conversations to all be at the centre of the analysis. Despite the limited time frame in which this research was undertaken, and as mentioned earlier, the research also engaged reflexively with the interpretation of the analysis by inviting the young person's research advisory group and young peer researchers to

comment on the anonymised and general thematic findings through a designated workshop and one to one feedback opportunities prior to writing the report.

Safeguarding and ethical considerations

Prior to starting data collection, the research project obtained ethical approval from the Institute of Applied Social Research (IASR) Ethics Committee at the University of Bedfordshire. This was then approved by the London School of Economics Research Ethics Committee. The steering group was also informed of the ethical framework for the research. The research was conducted in line with the ethical requirements of the Government Economic and Social Evaluation Unit⁶, the Sociological Research Association (SRA) ethical standards and the child-specific guidelines of ERIC (ethical research involving children) that have been developed by UNICEF and Child Watch (2013). These guidelines address the ethical particularities of research with children, including researching sensitive contexts.

The informed consent process was a critical part of the research conversation and young people were provided with written and verbal information in advance as well as before the conversation took place, with an interpreter where necessary, to ensure that they were fully aware of what their involvement in this research would entail and how their information would be used. A video explaining involvement was also developed, which was shared with gatekeepers and young people in advance. During the conversations, the university researchers checked in with young people to make sure they were ok to continue and reminded them at different points in the conversation that they did not have to answer any questions they did not want to and could stop at any time. Following the conversations, the university researchers also checked in with participants to make sure they were ok and, where necessary a trusted support worker was also asked to check in with them. Each young person was provided with a 'Thank You' voucher following the conversation.

The research conversations were mostly conducted in person with a young participant, a peer researcher and a university researcher. However, the participants were always asked for their consent to have a peer researcher involved. Where they opted out of this, the conversations

took place with a university researcher only. All young people were offered an interpreter in their language, taking into account any dialect and gender needs and preferences. Telephone interpreters were used to minimise the number of people in the room and ensure that the young person felt as comfortable as possible to share their experiences.

An important part of this research was to provide young people with empowering opportunities and spaces - whether this was part of the young people's advisory group workshop or through the research conversations, where young people could make decisions about how they wanted to engage, what information they wanted to share with the research, and ensuring young people were fully aware of how their information would be used. This was done through an ethos of power-sharing, and applying the principles of participation in practice with children and young people with experiences of migration and displacement.

Limitations of the research

There are several limitations to this research. First, the timescales for this project were limited initially to five months. This meant that the research could provide limited opportunities for advisory group members and peer researchers to engage in the research process and it could not allow for the collection of data from more young participants, giving a relatively small sample size. Nevertheless, the dedication and strong engagement of the peer researchers and advisory group members, the ongoing support of the project partners, London Councils' staff and the steering group, has enabled a very rich set of data to be gathered for analysis. This is also a testament to the importance of the subject matter and the willingness of young participants to share their often very difficult stories but also their creative ideas for reform.

Secondly, while the research was able to get a good spread of experiences of young people living in different London boroughs, most of the young people who participated in the conversations were referred to us by SLRA staff rather than by local authorities directly. Various measures were taken to facilitate recruitment through local authorities, including meeting with different social work teams, providing general and targeted recruitment information, approaching service managers and directors at different levels, and extending the recruitment process by two months. In the end, of the 15 young participants, six (6) were referred to the university researchers by local authorities directly while the remaining nine (9) were referred by SLRA. Although there was no clear dividing line between the experiences

of those referred by local authorities and those referred by SLRA, those referred by local authorities did tend to have better social care experiences, though not necessarily better experiences of the asylum system overall. Similarly, not all of those referred by SLRA had negative experiences of social care. Nevertheless, this research does not set out to quantify and compare these experiences, but within the findings below, we do try to reflect on these contextual differences where possible.

A final limitation of this project was that it was not been able to gather detailed views on young people's experiences of the National Transfer Scheme (NTS), which was part of the initial intention. In part, the young participants of the research conversations were either unaware of whether they had been transferred through the NTS system or through the existing pan-London rota or had only remained in one local authority throughout their care journey. Further research would be required to look at this issue in detail.

While there has already been a good deal of research with and about unaccompanied young people living across England and the UK, including several participatory projects, most notably on young people's well-being and transitions to adulthood (Allsopp and Chase, 2020), young people's experiences of caring on the move (Aissatou et al, 2022), young people's experiences during the Covid-19 pandemic (Stalford et al, 2022), and unaccompanied young people with experiences of modern slavery (Hynes, Connolly, Duran, Matar and Durr 2022), this research provides us with an important look at the specific context in Greater London and at a critical point in time in the UK with respect to the Illegal Migration Act 2023 and the general election. Moreover, the focus the research places on integration and its connection to well-being and protection, as defined by young people themselves, also offers important insights for this neglected area of policy and practice. As such, it provides a valuable source of evidence of young people's voices that should be central to policy debates.

The Findings: The Voices of Children and Young People

This section highlights the voices, experiences and perspectives of the children and young people at the heart of this research. For them, taking part in the research was more than just an act of informed consent; It was a leap of faith. They entrusted their hope and stories in the research to bring about positive changes for other children and young people who find themselves in similar circumstances navigating complex systems of asylum and care. This commitment can be seen in the quote below.

"I'm happy to talk if this is going to contribute to fixing the services and helping other people why not talk about it." (Young Person 9, Age 17, Sudan)

What follows in this section reflects *their* realities. It reflects the trust they had in the research to be a platform for their voices and an invitation for others to understand their circumstances more deeply.

How children defined the key concepts central to the research

The concepts of *well-being*, *protection*, and *integration* were central to this research, guiding both the structure and sequence of the research conversations. These concepts served as anchor points for opening-up discussions with children and young people about their experiences and perspectives on the asylum and care systems and on their sense of belonging in the communities in which they live in London. Gaining insights into these concepts from the perspectives of children and young people was essential for understanding how they relate to and define these terms. This approach was important for facilitating meaningful conversations based on mutual understanding and for identifying and bridging any gaps between children's perspectives and professional, policy, and academic interpretations of these concepts.

There were overlaps in how children and young people understood these concepts, reflecting the ways in which their experiences of asylum, care, and community have shaped their meanings. Ultimately, these interconnections have influenced their sense of belonging and the extent to which they have felt able to find a new place to belong and a place that belongs to them. Importantly, themes relating to protection appeared across both well-being and integration, suggesting that protection is the foundation for all other outcomes.

This research utilized the key elements of children and young people's definitions of these three concepts to shape the thematic structure and content of this chapter.

Defining Protection

Children and young people explored their perceptions of the meaning of protection, drawing from their personal experiences and perspectives. Below are the central elements that created the scaffolding around which their understanding of the concept of protection was grown.

- Having a child and young person-centred approach to asylum procedures and outcomes, including age assessments
- Timely asylum and age assessment decisions.
- Shared responsibility by all professionals for safeguarding children and their best interests through the asylum process
- Empowering children and young people through accessible and appropriate information about their rights and entitlements.
- Quality of legal representation and effective legal representation
- Being believed by those in positions of power
- Having access to independent advocacy / independent case work.

The powerful quote below by a young research participant is illustrative of some of the central elements above:

"Yes, I know what protection means. Like I have come here and asked the Government for protection. To be honest I don't feel protected because I have not got my documents yet and there was news about Rwanda which had frightened me a lot. So, when I get my paperwork then I will be relaxed. I was listening to a lot of news from different media sources at the time which made me really scared." (Young Person 8, Age 17, Afghanistan)

Defining Well-Being

In discussing their perceptions of well-being, children and young people identified several key elements they regarded as being central to their distinct needs and experiences as

unaccompanied children and young people. What they said can be distilled into the following key elements. Underpinning their discussions was the importance of belonging for their well-being.

- Safety and security - Having a safe place to call home
- Good mental health and having peace of mind
- Not being lonely and having reliable people to talk to
- Professional support and knowing professionals are taking responsibility for you and your needs.
- Having hope for the future
- Not having to live everyday with the fear created by a hostile policy environment
- Being protected from racism and discrimination
- Relationships, community and social connection
- Opportunities for fun and recreation

The quote below illustrates many of the aspects of well-being we have identified above:

"Well-being, it means being physically and mentally well and fit, and being able to be active and doing stuff so you don't feel worried or lonely, even if you have challenges. Mental health is important. For example, suicide is very risky if you are not OK. You are not around your family and you might not be able to talk to other people." (Young Person 11, Age 20, Sudan)

Defining Integration

Finally, in exploring integration, it is interesting to note that young people viewed integration as a key factor for their well-being and there were often overlaps in the research conversations between young people's understanding of and conversations about well-being and of integration. This can be seen above, where well-being was identified as being closely related to belonging, or more precisely multiple belongings. This close connection highlights the significance of centralising integration in policy and practice responses to the care and protection of unaccompanied children and young people. Arguably, the way in which children and young people have brought together well-being and integration, reflects the definition of well-being in the Children Act 2004, which also focuses on positive relationships, contributions to society, development and futures, social and economic well-being, recreation and education and living arrangements, amongst other elements (UK

Government, 2004). It is important to make this link between integration and legislation in a context where the language of integration and other related terms such as durable solutions and belonging, are rarely applied to unaccompanied children and young people in a UK policy context, and where there is an absence of national or even local integration compacts or frameworks for them that would place this at the centre. It is worth noting that whilst bringing together well-being and integration in this way emphasises integration as a legal and care obligation and therefore as a central consideration of statutory practice, children and young people also placed considerable emphasis on well-being and integration as being linked to the provision of freedom and opportunities, such as having the freedom to hope, to form affiliations, social connections and multiple belongings, and the freedom and opportunities to enact good futures. This emphasis on well-being and integration as being linked to the provision of freedom and opportunity resonates with previous participatory research with unaccompanied young people where freedom and equality of opportunity to be and to do was highlighted as the foundation for integration (Hynes, Connolly, Duran, Matar and Durr 2022).

Having established the conceptual framework of well-being, protection and integration as articulated by the young participants, this report will now explore their specific experiences around these concepts, prioritizing their voices and insights. Together their narratives highlight the need for key areas for change, linked to experiences where they find themselves viewed primarily as migrants, rather than children deserving of care and protection. Moreover, they also provide important lessons from effective practices and approaches that centralise their dignity and reflect their rights and identities as children.

CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE'S EXPERIENCES OF PROTECTION

Claiming International Protection.

Process over protection: The need for child and youth-centred approaches

Earlier in this report, it was established that a fundamental principle at the core of children and young people's understanding of protection is the necessity for a child and youth-centred approach to the asylum and immigration process. The young participants spoke about this necessity concerning both the process of claiming asylum and the administrative and judicial decision-making outcomes that impact their international protection needs. While a small

minority of young people were positive or ambivalent about their experiences and outcomes, as can be seen in the quote below, the overwhelming majority expressed that their rights and best interests were not sufficiently identified or addressed throughout the process and that the process was prioritised over their protection.

"Oh yeah, the experience, like I had a good experience because they hear you carefully and they make sure they translate it good." (Young Person 10, Age 19, From Eritrea)

In the first instance, young people emphasized the harm caused by the expectation of repeatedly recounting their personal stories of danger, harm, and loss. They explained how the process and procedures around the asylum process, such as meeting with solicitors or the substantive interview itself, intensify the weight of their traumatic pasts, creating an emotional backwash that not only risks inconsistencies in their narratives—jeopardizing their asylum claims—but also poses a significant threat to their peace of mind and mental health.

"For children, their mind is very much vulnerable because of the situation they have gone through. It is very hard, and they might forget something that affects their life. That can then impact them when they have to talk about their experiences repeatedly; they might say or do something that is harmful to their life....., Well to be honest I sometimes, because I'm forgetful, some things I may forget and then I just try to remember and then to tell him at that moment..... It's not only for the solicitor, there is another interview, they don't want to repeat that again, there is another interview again, they are going to tell it again so they might get sick." (Young Person 2, Age 16, Ethiopia)

Young people shared experiences regarding the extent to which the asylum space was one that was designed in the best way to hear their stories and reasons for international protection and the extent to which it was a space where they could fully be listened to. They expressed confusion and a sense of being lost within the volume of questions. They spoke of feeling unable to freely express their experiences and their views on their need for protection, perceiving the listening process as tokenistic and an instrumental procedural step in decision-making rather than a child-sensitive response to their distinct experiences and needs for international protection. One participant stated,

“Yes, there were important questions that needed to be asked, but there were also many unnecessary ones. The sheer number of questions was overwhelming, regardless of whether they were necessary or not.” (Young Person 9, Age 17, Sudan)

As an extension of this, some young people further highlighted the political complexity of certain questions posed to them during the asylum interview process and expressed that many of these were beyond the scope of their knowledge and experiences as children in their countries of origin.

“And I might say – let’s say that, okay basically that time of questions, they ask you like, “Oh, what’s the reason?” and if you describe, “This is the reason,” they ask you like to go deeper, deeper, deeper sometimes, you know, because they go like – it’s going to be type of question, like you know, political way. And then, yeah exactly, which is like very wrong to ask if someone is not even like interested in political, like someone is in a very removed way. He might not like know everything what’s gone in the city.” (Young Person 11, Age 20, Sudan)

With remarkable dignity and honesty, they spoke about how feelings of shame associated with the reasons for their international protection needs, prevented them from fully revealing their experiences during the asylum process with the potential to undermine perceptions of their credibility. One young person highlighted carrying experiences so traumatic that he couldn't even share with his mother and father, let alone strangers acting as asylum adjudicators on behalf of the State. Another young person, whose quote is below, explained how shame had prevented him from disclosing the full nature of the reason he needed international protection and that this had been compounded by a process that failed to provide him with the time or space to tell his story fully, ultimately leading to a refusal of his asylum claim.

“The thing is at that time, I wasn’t even to a friend telling anyone about my case because I didn’t know their case because I didn’t know my case as well. I wasn’t open to being honest with people. Even with the social worker at that time. I wasn’t open with them because I was scared to tell them about my case. I was thinking the mentality ‘How are you going to know my story?’ I was feeling ashamed at that time but then based on my new case, the new solicitor, the first thing he did when I met him, he said ‘You need to go to see a doctor’, because I have scars on my back and my legs as well when I arrived to the UK.” (Young Person 6, Age 24, Albania)

Many young people also addressed their experiences of being rendered powerless when confronted by the authority of the State through the asylum process. They provided examples that threw into sharp relief the contrast between their subordinate position as children and young people in a new country with limited realised rights, and the significant power of state authorities. They expressed their perceptions of the adversarial and judgemental nature of the asylum interview process, contrasting these to proceedings that could be compassionate, underpinned by an ethic of care, and constructive towards finding the best possible international protection outcomes for children and young people. As one young person said:

'I don't think the interview is a good idea because when they ask you these questions, it makes you feel like you have done something.'" (Young Person 9, Age 17, From Sudan)

"Yes, I think it needs to be changed, they need to be a little bit more care with people, especially when somebody comes from a different country let's say. I'm not saying because I came from a different country but I'm saying you don't know, he came for a reason, for example to the UK at least to be more helpful, at least to ask in a way so they can understand it. I don't know (Young Person 6, Age 24, Albania)

In one powerful example, a young person spoke of being caught in the middle of the power of two State authorities when subject to immigration judicial decision-making procedures.

"So I went to court and I remember that was like when my life turned around and went downhill, because on the court I remember the Home Office was going against me and they said that we asked (my country's) Embassy and they said this family is not in blood feud and they just refused my case and that's it. I'm in a country where with one sentence my life can be ruined. Because they asked back home, and back home they want people to think that this is a safe country for the tourists to come, that we are living in paradise. It's safe for the tourists but it's not for me and for people that is here." (Young Person 5, Age 25, Albania)

Waiting for Decisions: Protection on Hold

For all the children and young people who participated in the research conversations, waiting in legal, social and psychological limbo for extended periods of time after their arrival for an asylum determination outcome was an integral part of their collective experiences. They identified 4 common patterns in their experiences of waiting which included long periods of

waiting between arrival and subsequent interviews when much of the evidence is prepared and presented, long periods of waiting for their actual asylum decision, delays due to age assessments, and then chronic levels of waiting through appeals rights exhausted processes. The fact that young people highlighted delays across all stages of the process and not only between the claim and the decision reflects an important systemic consideration, the significance of which cannot be overstated for considering the tangible and profound impacts on their safety, security, best interests and development. All these experiences are positioned contrary to the no-delay welfare principle of the Children Act (1989) which makes it clear that delays in administrative and judicial proceedings relating to the upbringing of a child are likely to prejudice children's welfare and must be kept to a minimum. It is unsurprising, therefore, that children and young people highlighted the detrimental impact of living in limbo with no status upon their welfare, highlighting the often-severe impact on their mental health and sense of security and belonging as their everyday experiences are refracted through an unbearable sense of fear and worry about their lives and futures. As can be seen in the quotes below, by focusing on the impacts on their mental health, many of the young participants have framed the profound bureaucratic uncertainty created by the various administrative and judicial asylum related procedures as a fundamental health issue for them, culminating in anxiety and suicidal ideation. The first quote below is by a 17-year-old young person from Afghanistan who waited 15 months between their arrival in the UK at the age of 15, and having their substantive interview, and who was still waiting for an asylum decision at the time of the research conversation.

"I think 15 months is a very long time and it's very frustrating. You have to wait. I don't know when if I'm going to stay or they'll ask me to leave. It's a part of my life now that I have to go through everyday." (Young Person, 3, Age 17, Afghanistan)

This is further illustrated in the quotes below from a 20-year-old young person from a central African country who arrived in the UK at the age of 16. At the time of the research conversation, they spoke of waiting for over 4 years for the resolution of their asylum case following a refusal at first application and multiple procedural delays, including a protracted age assessment process that took 2 and a half years to conclude and culminated in a judicial outcome in his favour.

"When I got a rejection from the Home Office saying you are now going to be removed and sent back to the Home Country this added to the stress I went through. They kept asking me

to go to school but how can I be able to do that? When I was in school the teacher asks me what is my plans for the future, but I didn't have my life. My life is get through life, struggle, then die." (Young Person 14, Age 20, Country in Central Africa)

"All that time and sometimes you reach the point when you are lying down and you think is it better to harm yourself.....you think you have arrived in a country who are supposed to be about rights, then this." (Young Person 14, Age 20, Country in Central Africa)

Even for young people in this research who had secured refugee leave to remain or humanitarian protection, the waiting towards finally being able to solidly establish roots in the UK endures as they must embark along a prolonged route to permanence through a further application for indefinite leave to remain after their 5 years of refugee leave expires which is subject to requirements such as criminal offending and good character. For those young people who arrived prior to March 2023, and subject to the requirement of 'good character', an application to naturalise as a British citizenship is possible but even further extends the time they have to wait to finally gain that sense of security, belonging and permanence that citizenship can offer. As it stands, for those who arrived after March 2023, the route to full citizenship is presently denied under the Illegal Migration Bill which does not offer any automatic exemptions for unaccompanied children and young people. One young person who took part in this research was 25 years old and had arrived in the UK at the age of 12 years. In speaking about his experiences of finally getting to the stage of applying for citizenship he said:

"I spent more life here in than in Afghanistan. Children and young people need some kind of solution so you can just focus on your life. Children are not a category you need to be living all your childhood. (Protection) is not just about safety, it is about freedom. Children need freedom." (Young person 15, Age 25)

Protection Drift: Young People's Experiences of Being Appeals Right Exhausted

Some young people spoke about their experiences of being Appeals Rights Exhausted, linking this to their asylum applications being left to drift until they reached adulthood or were on the cusp of turning 18. All had arrived in the UK at the age of 16 or younger. The quote below captures the essence of this notion of 'drift,' with the young person drawing attention to an 'institutional drift' within the Home Office that moved him towards danger

from exploitation rather than a durable solution, and ultimately finding himself being held in immigration detention.

"It's not only my case it took them three years. Because I have people in my college and different colleges that I meet and I asked them. Everyone like two weeks before they turned 18 they were just refusing the case. So they were waiting for three years to refuse the case.....You can sort out the case in two months if you go in hard. That's my life right there, so I have to choose my way. Even though I would love to do jobs and do something, but I still went the wrong way because I messed with the wrong people, and they used me like a donkey." (Young Person 5, Age 25, Albania)

Another young person highlighted their sense of having experienced 'professional drift' ultimately leading to his circumstances of becoming appeals rights exhausted. His precarious legal situation and urgent need for international protection, while a significant concern for him, was overlooked by the professionals surrounding him, who let it drift, particularly his solicitor. In this instance, not only had the young person endured torture, an issue that had failed to be identified at their initial asylum application, but they also spoke of having been placed at risk of detention and removal at the end of the appeal process.

"In that time my social worker she was asking about, I explained, I told her everything. I even sent her the contact for my solicitors as well so I don't know if she's been in touch or not but in that time they were telling me "We are only waiting, waiting" because I was only speaking on the phone with them and I never got the support from them from a solicitor to go and at least see and be interested in my case.....When I went to court I got refused again, I tried to appeal and I was refused again.....Then I changed my solicitor.....and the new solicitor said they haven't worked your case. They didn't really contact the Home Office. They didn't really do the proper job. (Young Person 6, Age 24, Albania)

Young people who had experienced being appeals rights exhausted spoke of the inescapable hopelessness, fear, anxiety and loss of agency they experienced from being at the end of the line of their asylum applications. One young person spoke about feeling unsafe in their foster placement and wondering if the cars pulling up outside their home were immigration or police. Another young person told us of having felt so out of control that they tried to end their life. Several young people who participated in the research conversations had been criminalised for immigration-related offences or had experienced immigration detention as part

of a removal process, though they were not ultimately removed. One young person reflected that being appeals rights exhausted as being akin to being in prison, as can be seen in the quote below:

Because on the news, say, if you goes out and a police car catch you on the street, I saw on the [inaudible 00:08:03] police doing ID research. Yeah, so I've, especially after the rejection from Home Office, I'm very scared. I don't stay at home quite often because every time when a cab gets through from in front of my house, I'm worried, I'm, because I need a report from the Home Office every month. Yeah, so last time I reported I don't feel well. Like yeah, it's not good, like the feeling is not, it's like you are a prison, you know? (Young Person 7, Age 20, China)

The Protection Gaps in the Age Assessment Process

Many of the children and young people who participated in the research were subject to age disputes and assessment processes. Whilst it wasn't always clear from the research conversations whether the age assessments were Home Office or social work driven because of children and young people's limited understanding of who had been driving them, most participants appeared to indicate that they were primarily led by the Home Office. Furthermore, although some children and young people reported being believed by social workers throughout Home Office led age assessments, others spoke of not being supported by their social worker through the process, making it challenging to ascertain which public authority was behind the circumstances and the role of local authorities. All the young participants with experiences of being age assessed highlighted their perceptions of the process as creating protection gaps for them. They identified these in procedural terms, highlighting the lack of care throughout the process to the complexity of their needs, to their significant traumas, and they further highlighted the protection gaps resulting from the consequences of the age assessment process in terms of outcomes beyond the decision itself. The quote below from a 17-year-old girl, who like many of the young participants, was assumed to be an adult within the early moments of her arrival, encapsulates this central concern of young people when she highlights that it is a protection issue for children to be wrongly assigned an adult age, and to experience the emotional toll of intensively not being believed through repeated questioning.

"Then after that it all happened on the same night, after two or three hours they took me to another interview and she said, "Can you write the year you were born?" And I wrote it and then she said, "It's not the same with this one that they give you." I said, "I was born on this day." So she said, "No, this is the date." I said, "No, this is the date. I don't care if you are going to treat me as a child or as an adult but it's going to be right on my ID that I was born in 2002, because I was born in 2007, it's literally five years different, that's going to be unsafe when I go because .. I was so crying, and I was so depressed, so I don't have any words to explain that, so I said, "Okay, just leave me alone please." Then they took me back and then they took me for a third interview on the same day." (Young Person 13, Age 17, Eritrea)

As in the above quote, it was a common feature within the research conversations for young people to speak of their experiences of the age assessment process as happening intensively over multiple interviews with multiple professionals, asking questions that amplified children's sense of fear, bewilderment and loss. This can be seen in the quotes below:

"They interviewed me 5 times every one 3 hours, 2 and a half hours, more. It took around 9 or 10 months. There were 4 or 5 people, 2 ladies. I didn't know who they were. They stop my asylum case because of the age assessment. I was sad because the Home Office didn't believe me. They say you are bigger. The social worker said 'you're right.' " (Young Person 3, Age 17. Afghanistan)

"It was really upsetting. At the beginning it was normal. When they first interviewed me I thought it's something like they do that in general, like anyone can be asked question about their age. So I thought it something normal. I didn't take it too seriously. But then it continued and continued, and they were going into like more detail about my family, because I left my home country because of like the trouble I caused, or like the things happened to me in my home country. It made me to flee..... and they were forcing me sometimes that I was telling them like I don't want to talk about my dad especially, because my dad's got like heart disease and I don't want to talk about it. It makes me sad. It makes me more depressed when I talk about it." (Young Person 4, Age 19, Iraq Kurdistan)

Like the asylum decision-making process, children and young people also spoke of having to wait, including for considerable periods of time, before the conclusion of their age assessments, owing to a variety of key factors that had been beyond their control, such as Home Office delays, judicial proceedings and professionals not supporting them to find appropriate legal

representation. There were examples of age assessment processes taking 2 1/2 and 3 years to resolve.

"For 2 1/2 years everywhere I go people questioned my age, questioning my identity. How would they know that. It's your identity. I struggled a lot." (Young Person 14, 20, Central African country)

For however long they waited, a few of the young people who had been age assessed highlighted varying levels of heightened vulnerability as a result, ranging from being placed in adult hotel accommodation to homelessness and destitution. They also spoke of different responses from social work professionals to their age assessment situations, with examples shared of the importance of having been believed by their social workers and of the opposite where they had been unsupported by their social worker.

"My (local authority/social worker) case worker she was standing behind me." (Young Person 3, Age 17, Afghanistan)

Understanding young people's rights and entitlements and access to independent advocacy.

Given the complex and multiple systems that are involved in the lives of unaccompanied children and young people, it is important that unaccompanied children have access to all relevant information about these systems to support their meaningful participation, their effective protection, and the realisation of their rights through better outcomes and experiences. For this reason, the research explored with young participants the extent to which they felt they had access to information about the various systems they experience, their rights and entitlements across them, who had taken responsibility for sharing information, and the extent to which they felt they had someone '*on their side and by their side*' to advocate for them and ensure the realisation of their rights. As the overarching pattern, young people highlighted not feeling like they had been given access to information about their rights and entitlements in relation to what protections they should have expected from within systems and from professionals associated with those systems. Whilst this question was asked directly to young people in the research conversations, this theme also appears indirectly too throughout the ways in which they variously recalled their experiences of systems and procedures, their positive or

poor relationships with professionals, and their feelings of agency and powerlessness. This overarching pattern is expressed in the quote below:

"I do not have anybody who advises me with regards to this stuff. When I grow up, I grow up independently. My father has told me that we are independent people, you are an independent person....." (Young Person 2, Age 16, Ethiopia)

The impact of young people not always knowing and or understanding their interests relative to professional roles in processes is well illustrated in the example in the quote below of a young person's total bewilderment during a Home Office age assessment process:

"There were 4 or 5 people. 2 ladies and I didn't know who they were. There were 2 people, man and lady. They were on my side, everything I say, but I didn't know who they were." (Young Person 3, Age 17, Afghanistan)

The quote above, whilst intimating that the young person had representation through the age assessment process, also demonstrates that at the same time he did not know who was representing him and what their roles were in relation to ensuring his best interests and procedural protections. This is an example that also highlights the importance not just of giving young asylum seekers information but of ensuring that the information given, and the method through which it is given, is consistent with their distinct circumstances as children and youth, and as children and youth with special protection needs as unaccompanied children. Throughout the research conversations, young participants gave some examples of the ways in which their circumstances as asylum seeking and refugee children and young people in a new country can serve to undermine their information rights and their rights within institutional settings and administrative and judicial processes. They highlighted being perplexed by the very meaning of asylum and the implications, such as described in the quote below:

"They just told me, "You go, you see a UK flag," so I just follow, I see the flag is flying so I just follow there. When they talk about claiming asylum or asylum seeker because I don't understand, yeah, I don't know what it means even in my country and language, so yeah. And then just like we end up in care home, yeah." (Young Person 7, Age 20, China)

Additionally, young participants spoke of the following factors, such as language barriers, not understanding the spoken and unspoken 'rules' of the UK and they also spoke of feeling unable to assert their agency as migrant children either because of having experienced direct hostility

within systems or from feeling subordinate and grateful for any support given as can be seen in the quotes below.

"Because when I arrived, the situation was so confusing. They told me that "You are illegal," and they were not just telling me only. All the people who had arrived, they were telling everybody, so it didn't come to our mind that we should tell them that we are too tired for this interview." (Young Person 8, Age 17, Afghanistan)

"Dogs and animals have more rights than us. (Young Person 5, Age 25, Albania)

"If you come, as a new person you come in like "Oh, can you provide me this, can you provide me this?" and then yeah, you cannot like ask every time, "Oh I need this, I need this," unless like they will give it to you sometimes. Like I know like [inaudible 37:10] find someone [inaudible 37:12] we have two conversations, "Oh can you take me this one?" No, it's not going to be happening and it's not going to be easy for everyone. (Young Person 11, Age 20, Sudan)

There was a smaller group of young people who spoke of being informed about and understanding their rights and entitlements, or of being able to advocate for themselves, and positive relationships with professionals and dignity practices were at the heart of what they said established the foundations for their understanding and for their confidence to speak out on their own behalf. However, as can be seen below, that is not to say that they didn't find it difficult to communicate their needs and wishes:

"Yeah, they understand you, yeah, this and that, so they have to understand you, they have to talk to you the right way with politeness..... To be honest, sometimes it's hard to say but sometimes it's easy, sometimes it's hard like specially if the, if you know the person, I mean like if the person is new for you and sometimes to say the right thing is hard. Like some people, they might like it, some people they might not. Some people, they might happy when you speak like freely, some people they might not." (Young Person 10, Age, 19, Eritrea)

"Because the Social Worker can help me. We don't know what's the rule, we don't have everything. We came here from, make a, we make a future, yeah, so it's like we don't have any helper here. We don't have mum, no one here, so .." (Young Person 1, Age 17, Afghanistan)

These findings speak to the significance of what is already established in children's rights discourse about not making assumptions about knowledge and understanding, and of ensuring

accessibility and appropriateness of information. They also speak to the importance for children's rights of centring dignity and belonging in systems and practices. This report will focus further on dignity and belonging in the section of this report that focuses on social care practices given that social workers as corporate parents and those involved in the care and well-being of young asylum seekers are in a central position to influence children and young people's experiences of dignity and belonging.

Given that a significant number of young people who participated in this research were being supported through a charity organisation delivering an independent 'guardian like' service through a case work model, , it is unsurprising that the issue of having an independent case worker to represent their interests through systems was central to many of their experiences and their thoughts on how best to protect children and young people and their rights and entitlements through processes. This was the case for those with and without reported positive relationships with social workers and other care professionals such as foster carers and personal advisors. Young participants offered a range of examples relating to improved protection outcomes particularly across asylum determination, including for young people appeals rights exhausted, age assessments and, in a few circumstances, what appeared to be the National Transfer Scheme, where moving children to different authorities was contrary to their interests and wishes. What is interesting to note is that most young people with experiences of this specialist case work service only experienced this at a significant crisis point, rather than as an early intervention, and often when their protection needs had been allowed to drift. Their introduction to the service happened mostly, although not always, through word of mouth with their peers, rather than through any systematic signposting by care and protection professionals, such as local authorities, foster care, or even solicitors. As can be seen below, having the protection of this 'guardian like' service was reported by young people as often being the 'difference that made the difference' for them. The specialist case workers young people spoke of had legal knowledge and expertise of the asylum system and were linked in with expert networks and professionals. They were therefore able to intervene to introduce children and young people's circumstances to legal and other relevant experts to turn around what had been poor and unsafe experiences and outcomes through the asylum system as can be seen in the quote below:

"The main thing in that time was I was scared because the only thing I was thinking was they're going to catch me and they're going to send me straight away to Albania. I was thinking only

about the court situation at that time, about the refusal.....I wasn't detained because I received the letter and then X (the advocate) starting contacting the solicitor....and they said they can't carry on with my case.....I went to see a few solicitors but they were quite busy...one solicitor accepted when X (advocate) contacted them. I needed the solicitor quickly because in that time I received the letter from the Home Office and I need to go and sign, because I have to be detained." (Young Person 6, 24, Albania)

It is significant that these specialist case work interventions mostly happened by chance and after procedural drift and poor mistakes in and around the asylum decision-making process rather than systematically or at the early stages of children and young people's asylum applications. It is important to emphasise this as it stands in contrast to the lack of such specialist independent representation and advocacy experienced by children and young people at arrival. Indeed, none of the young participants made mention of having either a Refugee Council Children's Panel Advisor to represent their best interests upon arrival or a statutory Independent Child Trafficking Guardian in circumstances where this was / potentially was appropriate. While this research is deep and interpretative, it still represents a small sample, yet it is still important to draw attention to this pattern in the data as a protection gap for further consideration.

The role of the corporate parent through the asylum process

This section of the findings offers an invitation to reflect on the role of social work in supporting children and young people to navigate through asylum processes as seen through the eyes of the young participants in this research. As will be outlined below, their experiences and perspectives highlight variable practices across local authorities in relation to the support they received in relation to the practicalities of the asylum process. This can be a challenging area of practice and this report offer young people's experiences and insights as an opportunity for reflection on how best interests, protection and practice play out in this space. This challenging area of practice was framed by some of the young participants as a potentially disempowering space for practitioners:

"They don't get involved. My foster carer told me because the Local Authority cannot get involved with Home Office, so even Home Office get me and they wouldn't say anything and they couldn't do anything. Partly, it's Home Office. It is like a layer above of Local Authority.

I don't think they can get involved with the position made by the Home Office." (Young Person 7, Age 20, China)

"I did share this (concern) with my (foster) family and my case (social) worker, but they said 'it's the Home Office, we just have to wait there's nothing we can do. Just have to wait.'" (Young Person 3, Age, 17, Afghanistan)

As can be seen in the quotes below, young participants, just over half, highlighted a separation between practices of care and the practicalities of asylum support, even in those circumstances where they experienced positive relationships with their social workers. They spoke of not being supported by their social workers or personal advisors to find or quality assure solicitors, of being given a list of solicitors, or of accessing advocacy services through friends who either found them solicitors or transferred their cases to credible ones after poor practices and drift. Some young people also spoke of being unaccompanied to their substantive interview. Some of these aspects are illustrated in the quotes below:

"I came for help, and I asked and they said 'no problem', and they find me a solicitor for my age assessment. Also my asylum. I ask her and said 'I don't have any solicitor for my asylum' and they said 'OK, no problem, I'm going to find you a good solicitor." (Young Person 1, 17, Afghanistan)

"But my personal adviser was off sick. I call the council three times and they find back-up, so they get me a list as well and she says she's going to call for it, call to help but after that, she called me back and she says she couldn't find a new solicitor. She just sent me three tables. I call as well, you know? I have called it already before. I called the list as well. Let me show you....What they have done is what I have done, so what is the point of helping me. ". (Young Person, 7, Age 20, China)

Others recalled their experiences of being supported to find solicitors by social workers, personal advisors or key workers, of being accompanied to asylum interviews, and of not having to carry such a weight of responsibility on their own, such as in the example below, which also highlights the importance of involving children and young people in conversations around what is in their best interests in relation to this area of practice across process and outcomes.

"My social worker always asked me how I was with the interview. She came into do the interview with me for the Home Office even when she was ill.....I had no solicitor for 6 months. I had to chase it. I write to my solicitor to ask who is taking the case.....I googled the company and went to another location and the person gave me another address.....They said someone is going to call me and everything is normal and we are waiting on the Home Office to make a decision. I realised if you are waiting on the Home Office you are waiting for years.....It was good for me to call my solicitor and the social worker asked me if I needed help but I felt like I needed to do it myself." (Young Person 11, 20, Sudan)

The degree to which children and young people also felt emotionally supported by local authorities throughout the asylum process also saw this pattern of variance, with young people highlighting examples of asking for social work support and not receiving it, amplifying their sense of being alone, and others reporting feeling held and understood throughout the process by corporate parenting figures such as social workers. Again, this is illustrated this through the voices of young participants below:

"When I say settled, I am settled but still so much in my mind like my mum and how they will call me for my interview so bad things I still carry.....My social worker, everyone try their best to help me and to make me happy. Helping me to get my mum and my residence permit. My social worker he comforts me, he is like my second father." (Young Person 12, 17, Ethiopia)

"My social worker wasn't helpful, wasn't a good social worker. Many times, I was asking my social worker, "I want somebody to support me, either you or the key worker, if they can come with me, support me in my interviews," because I even explained to the social worker, I said, "That's why I need somebody, because I don't feel comfortable. They are asking me a lot of hard questions, difficult questions. It makes me really upset when they ask me those questions. I do really need your support. But nobody even responded, like they didn't even care." (YP 4, 19, Iraq Kurdistan)

YOUNG PEOPLE'S EXPERIENCES OF WELL-BEING AND INTEGRATION

As outlined earlier in this report, young people focused on the themes of safety and security, including safe and suitable accommodation and having a place to call home and feel at home, of having good mental health and peace of mind, of not being lonely, and of having hope for the future / 'hope to live 'and a sense of purpose and agency, as being at the heart of their considerations of the meaning of well-being. Fundamentally, they focused on having positive experiences of professional support and positive experiences of professional relationships as being the central means to the fulfilment of each of the elements of well-being they identified. It was evident in the research conversations with young people, that their understanding of well-being was not only closely aligned with both their sense of belonging (or not) but also their sense of what it means to be cared for by local authorities. The close association between well-being, belonging and care made by young people throughout the research conversations not only echoes the psychological and social care literature that links a sense of belonging with positive health and well-being but it also echoes research on the well-being of looked after and unaccompanied children and young people emphasising practices of belonging in social care spaces (Drammeh, 2019; Simkiss, 2012; Chase, 2013; Kohli and Mather, 2003). By drawing connections between their well-being, belonging and care, young people were also emphasising the importance of practices and approaches that prioritise their belonging by local authorities and other key professionals as being key to fulfilling their responsibilities for care and protection. Young people's focus on belonging, which, as can be seen in the various quotes below in this section, was often expressed through related words such as home, safety, freedom, peace, love, hope, future, people taking responsibility for them, trust and having positive professional and 'family-like' relationships.

Having a safe place to call home

Young participants spoke of their well-being as being fundamentally linked to having a safe place to call 'home' and the importance of local authorities ensuring they had a safe place to call 'home' as a central aspect of their practice. They expressed this doubly as being satisfied with a place of accommodation that was physically safe and that was also psychologically safe. This can be seen in the contrasted quotes below, with the first young person highlighting the significance of having key workers whom she felt acted like '*safety guards*' to her as the foundation for her well-being in her supported accommodation placement and the second highlighting repeated placement moves upon turning 18 and feeling constantly unsafe and

unable to settle within semi-independent accommodation, he felt was repeatedly jeopardizing his immigration status and placing an additional burden on him:

"Yeah, of course, my key workers, they are here 24/7, so if I feel unsafe, even if I am hungry and I don't have money, they ask my well-being and I can tell everything that I want to them and they are going to do that for me without an excuse. So my keyworkers have become my safety guards since I came here.....We talk, you know, even if I want to talk to someone because since I came here it's been like six months and I was in home. I mean I didn't go to college last year. I don't have friends, so like I feel so lonely. All the staff members are female, so I feel safe." (Young Person 13, Age 17, Eritrea)

"It doesn't feel like a home, when you settle somewhere and you change and you change and you change, you can't feel that's home, you can't feel it's a safe environment. I complained about the house....All the time they moved me, they changed me because my foster carers always insisted.....They sent me to another accommodation and there was the same thing going on. I would say I changed six of seven places (Young Person 6, Age 24, Albania)

As in the above quotes, children and young people highlighted different experiences of having (or not) a secure base to call home when reflecting on their well-being. This applied to both their experiences of foster care as well as semi-independent accommodation. The significance of having a secure base for young people's well-being is emphasised in the quote below where the importance of having *somewhere to call home* rather than just having *anywhere to live*, is emphasised:

"My well-being is now better but I was living in different places that affected my well-being. When I live everywhere I have come across so many bad things and so many scars on my body and now I am in one place I am better." (Young Person 12, Age 17, Ethiopia)

Whilst their experiences highlight the challenges of this area of practice for local authorities, they also highlight the profound importance to young people of having accommodation that is more than just a place to live but a place where they can live safely and at peace with themselves and others, and a place where they can begin to recover a sense of belonging after displacement and loss. In terms of their experiences of foster care, some young people highlighted examples of being welcomed into the fold of family life, with their foster families acting as buffers to the stresses and at times indignities of systems and processes through their care, acting as bridges to other professionals and community and peer networks, and as being vital bonds offering

them 'family-like' relationships and recovery through the stability of ordinary living as can be seen in the quote below:

"My social worker said, "This is your home now. You are not in a hotel." He says, "You're like mum [inaudible 00:04:10] like my mum," she was very good. Now I'm going there as well now in my foster carer home and my foster carer said, "This is your room and this is, it's like you are home. You feel like it's your home. Don't be shy, don't be scared, I'm here, I'm helping you.....I've been sad. This feels like a home. Nothing special. Just normal life. It's very special for me." (Young Person 1, Age 17 Afghanistan)

"They were really supportive. They even came with me for my substantive interview. They didn't want me to go alone. Like me and with another young boy, they were taking me to same park. They were always trying to make me happy. They were very, very supportive." (Young Person 4. Age 19. Iraq Kurdistan)

Other young people highlighted their experiences of living in foster care as having been ambivalent and at times hostile spaces, where they were made to feel unwelcome, where their relationships with the foster carers felt transactional, and where their foster care placement was seen as a place of burden rather than unburdening and a place where bad memories of separation and loss were amplified through a lack of love and care:

"I needed help, I needed someone to hug me. To say you are my child. As a human being I had hope that was going to be my second mum. I was like a new child born. I couldn't communicate. I remember the first Eid which is very important. She got me clothes and things. I was very excited as a child so I wore the clothes in bed and the lady asked if that is what they do in Afghanistan. It broke my heart.....I couldn't speak to change it. I was afraid I would get sent back home. Every day I was thinking tomorrow will be better. I had mental health, and I could have died from heartache." (Young Person 15, Age 25, Afghanistan)

"It reminds me of so many things in my mind, I'm not happy to be there..... "For example, where I live, there is an older woman, there is an old woman, she's not always, I am not comfortable with her, she always doesn't listen to me and insisted always, "It has to be done, it has to be done," this is a command and she doesn't listen, she doesn't understand me, she doesn't even try to understand you." (Young Person 2, Age 16, Ethiopia)

Young people with experiences of supported accommodation highlighted variable experiences. On the one hand, and as can be seen in the quote earlier by the young person who referred to her key workers as her 'safety guards', young people experienced them as a place of security underpinned by safe and reliable relationships with staff and other young people. On the other hand, young people also spoke of experiencing a lack of safety, security and belonging in their supported accommodation. In one example, where the young person experienced 6 or 7 placement moves as they transitioned to becoming a care-leaver from foster care, they feared that the behaviours of other young people in his various placements could potentially jeopardise his right to remain in the United Kingdom through association rather than his behaviours. In another example, such contextual considerations of the risks of generalised violence and crime resulted in a young person making the independent decision to move away from a particular area in London as they felt this would keep them out of harm's way.

"So wellbeing, yeah, in general, for example, my future living is very important for me. I used to be back in London. At that time, I was really depressed, really scared. I didn't feel safe. I didn't feel happy.....I am not in London anymore, because I don't feel safe there (in X). I got beaten very badly. When my time was finished with the foster care family, for 15 days I didn't have anywhere to go. The council, they provided me with accommodation, but I refused because I didn't feel safe, like at the town, to go outside, to go to college, I wasn't like feeling safe." (Young Person 4, Age 19, Iraq Kurdistan)

Both these examples link with the issue of community safety below and emphasise the special protection considerations in placement decisions for young people with unresolved immigration status where the risks of any involvement with the criminal justice system can undermine their rights to remain in the United Kingdom and add an additional layer of fear and uncertainty for young asylum seekers and refugees.

"Because my case as well, it was really scaring me seeing that kind of environment going on and I didn't really like that life because I didn't want to be reminded, flashbacks where I came from." (Young Person 6, Age 24, Albania)

Just under half of the children and young people in the research spoke of having been accommodated in temporary hotel accommodation at significantly vulnerable points of their asylum journey - mostly at arrival and through age assessment processes. They spoke of being accommodated with other children and young people in Home Office contingency hotels at

arrival, and of being accommodated in hotels with adults in the context of incorrect assumptions about their age at arrival. In one instance, a young person, whose age assessment circumstances are addressed earlier in this report, and who eventually had their age determined in their favour by a tribunal after years, had originally been accommodated as a child in supported accommodation with a social worker and key worker to then be removed into a hotel for adults without any social work intervention for 6 months. They never experienced the care and protection they were entitled to as a child and care leaver:

"After that they took me from that place where I had been for around 2 months I had to go through the age assessment process and they came to a decision that you are 18/19/20. I was sent back to the hotel and I suffered a lot.....The people in the hotel were nice and really understanding. I gave them my name and my real age. They tried to get organisations to help me" (Young Person 14, Age 20. Country in Central Africa)

Young people who had been accommodated in adult hotels spoke of the heightened anxiety and worry they felt due to the protection risks of being accommodated with adults and of being outside the child protection framework as can be seen below:

"It was so stressful for me, that was the worst time of my life, I can see that. I even don't feel my journey makes me so ungrateful and so feel sad at that time. I thought, "Is this why I give my life to be treated like this?" I wished I go back and make things right, because I didn't expect this when I come here, never..... I understand the Home Office because if they're scared to mix the adults with the childs, I understand that, but even if the woman on the first interview, the not so nice one, the rude one, she told me that she has to protect the childs. But I say, "But who is going to protect me?" I was so emotional at the time when she said that. "
(Young Person 13, Age 17, Eritrea)

"I wasn't comfortable at all, I wasn't feeling safe, because especially because they were putting two people in a room and they had put me with another adult, an older than me, an individual much older than me. It wasn't apparent to me what he was drinking or taking, but he wasn't normal. So those days I wasn't really sleeping or spending any time in the room, I didn't go back to the room, I was spending much of my time down at the reception." (Young Person 9, Age, 17, Sudan)

Community Safety and Racism

Young people, when linking their well-being with their safety and security, not only addressed the importance of having a safe home, but also of having safe communities to live in. This is an important aspect of understanding how to strengthen child protection and youth transition responses for unaccompanied children and youth. Even though unaccompanied children and young people are separated from their families, the issue of extra-familial harm in their communities and, through their networks, and at school, is rarely addressed beyond the issue of trafficking, and a more nuanced approach to extra-familial and relational safety and harm in communities would benefit policy and practice, especially given the potential risks for their immigration status. As can be seen in the quote below, and this report also began to address in the above section, some of the young people in this research highlighted having to confront the realities of serious youth violence in their communities:

"That's why when I was mentioning the kid, I've seen so many stuff and I've heard so many stuff. . Because I have a friend, I know him from college, but he never had a mum and dad, so he was in the wrong way until he got shot. I went in 2018, I saw him in the hospital, he was shot. He was 17 at that time, but he looks like 15 and he is distraught." (Young Person 5, Age 25).

They spoke of being witnesses, as above, of being victims of serious youth violence, and of being at risk from exploitation and harm in their communities, as below, because of their distinct vulnerabilities as migrant children and young people separated from their parents and as migrant children and young people who are made more vulnerable by their uncertain immigration status and whose immigration status itself is a fundamental safeguarding issue:

"When I was in X I didn't feel safe, because there were like a community of some young boys. I got beaten by them so badly. (Young Person 4, Age 19, Iraq Kurdistan)

"Being in a group of certain type of people can make you feel unsafe, and yeah, I think being safe is.... I do remember like it's easy to fall in a trap where, you know, some type, yeah, basically I will give an example, you need money and then those type of easy money work can lead you into trouble, where like you will feel unsafe. (Young Person, 11, Age 20, Sudan)

Additionally, there were examples of children and young people who spoke of having faced racism in their communities, as well as what they considered to be the effects of structural

racism in their communities, such as being fearful of the police to protect them in their communities or feeling unable to live at ease in their communities as a result of hostile immigration policies casting a shadow into their everyday lives to undermine their sense of well-being and belonging:

"Yeah, and they even follow me on the bus and try to beat me up.....When I get home I just talked to my foster carer and my foster carer just say "Next time if anything happens you needn't face it and tell the teacher.....I don't think the police do anything." (Young Person 7, Age 20, China)

"Can I do anything else?". Because on the news, say, if you goes out and a police car catch you on the street, I saw on the [inaudible 00:08:03] police doing ID research. Yeah, so I've, especially after the rejection from Home Office, I'm very scared. I don't stay at home quite often because every time when a cab gets through from in front of my house, I'm worried, I'm, because I need a report from the Home Office every month. Yeah, so last time I reported I don't feel well. Like yeah, it's not good, like the feeling is not, it's like you are a prison, you know? (Young Person 7, Age 20, China)

"I was scared from the police, because I was told by people that the police, they might catch you there on the street or somewhere. So then this guy and the social worker helped me to get this card.....For Rwanda, like the Home Office, would mention everyone's name and send a letter to their door that they have been selected for Rwanda." (Young Person 8, Age 17, Afghanistan)

Having Hope to Live as Well-Being

In addressing well-being, young participants also equated this with having hope for their life ahead where they could envisage possibilities for themselves, and where they could look forward to inhabiting their youth rather than being stuck by having it put on hold:

"So, well-being, yeah, in general, for example, my future living is very important for me." (Young Person 4, Age 19, Iraq Kurdistan)

They highlighted the importance of feeling like they had a right to a future:

"To be honest, I used to worry about the future, I used to worry about how am I going to start my own life? I had difficulties before but now, since I got my status, things started to change

and the worry is gone because I've started a new job, I've got settled here, I feel a bit safe
(Young Person 6, Age, 24, Albania)

And they spoke of the importance of having social work and social care professionals in their lives who thoughtfully build a scaffolding of care around them as an important structure for their hope and belief in themselves and their futures:

Yeah, I think it's always that it makes us that we feel loved, we feel safe because if someone loves you, they're not going to hurt you, right? So if you think that someone is loving you, you feel safe. I think that if they're worrying about my safety, and if they're asking about my day, if everything is going right I think I feel so safe, I feel so wellbeing, so I hope to live in life.(Young Person 13, Age 17, Eritrea)

Whilst the above quote demonstrates the indirect ways that quality care can offer children and young people hope for their futures, young people also highlighted the importance to them of professionals taking a very direct futures approach with them, recognising that a sense of well-being and belonging is as much harnessed to the hope for the future as it is to the circumstances in the present. They offered examples of when this had happened, such as in the quotes below with social workers in both these instances inviting young people to envisage possibilities in their futures:

"Yeah, he can help me and so it's, I live in London, and he said, "You want to go to Cambridge University for meeting with the thing about teacher?". I said, "OK," and I decide what can I do in the future..(it's important).. Because we don't know anything. We don't know future, what can we do.(Young Person 1, Age 17, Afghanistan)

"I buy books and then also my social worker, also she provide me books, and sometime she bought me a book that give every detail of like what you after, this is here, and what you need to go to university, and then they provide with you with what you might need unless if you didn't ask..(Young Person 11, Age 20, Sudan)

They also offered examples of when this had not happened and as well as the frustration of not being able to live a life of hope in their own talents and futures because of an asylum and immigration system that postpones durable solutions for children and young people and fails to attend to their development rights.

I do not have anybody who advises me with regards to this stuff. When I grow up, I grow up independently (Young Person 2, Age 16, Ethiopia)

Even though I'm in my 20s and I have time, I'm stuck a lot, I can't think about having a family.....If we don't take care of the young people, who's going to take care of us in the future? That's how it goes. You teach a young kid and you give him lesson and learning so he can .. the lesson that you gave him, then opportunities that you gave him, he can return it back.....I wasn't going to be here. I was going to be different way. Way different. I was going to be [inaudible - 0:22:01], because I was going to be educated properly. (Young Person 5, Age 25, Albania)

Relationships with social workers as the foundation for well-being and belonging

Following on from the above section, and indeed, the above quote, children and young people also highlighted the ways in which their well-being was closely wrapped up in the care they received from social workers as corporate parents. They emphasised the importance of relationships for communicating their care needs as well as for feeling cared for by their social workers as can be seen in the quote below:

"Depends (well-being) if you feel you have good attachments around you. I am so happy I have a social worker that understands me. Unfortunately, not everyone is the same. Not everyone has that relationship with their social worker." (Young Person 11, age 20, Sudan)

They highlighted the importance to them of being able to access their social workers and of this being central to their well-being knowing they have a safe adult they can trust to be there for them. This may sound like an obvious thing to say but within a context where they are children and young people alone in a new country with no or limited networks of care and protection, the importance of the formal social work relationship for their sense of dignity, worth and belonging was central to them. They therefore wanted to feel like their relationships with their social workers had a relational integrity to them and were about *care for them* rather than *care as a job* as can be seen in the quotes below:

"Because they (SW) are supporting you as a family, like you know? Let's say parents, they protect their family, right? It's like that, I understand..... They are like family because if you need anything, they will.....these people that were supporting me are very important for me....." (Young Person 10, Age 19, Eritrea)

"So yeah, you've got people that they're doing their job just to get their wages, it's just to put food on the table, they don't care about the youth." (Young Person 5, Age 25, Albania)

Be kind for us because your kindness is better than being professional I think. I love it when people become kind on me more than they become professional, I pray for that. That is really right now happening on my life, they become so kind for me, my social workers, so for a child it's better to be kind more than being professional, I believe that, even if I'm wrong. the difference is being professional is just working your job, you are treating me like that because it's your job, you're not going to care, that's being professional. But being kind is treating me by understanding that the way that I've been through, even if it's your job, being kind is treating and understanding me, so it's going to make me feel loved by you if you were my social worker. I think it's clear, yeah? (Young Person 13, Age 17, Eritrea)

As an integral part of thinking about their relationships with social workers, they highlighted the importance of these relationships for taking the edge of their feelings of loneliness and as being a source of comfort as they tried to secure legal status and adapt to life in a new country. This can be seen in the two contrasting quotes below that highlight the importance to young people of relationships with social workers that show them they are taking responsibility for them as the foundation of a caring relationship and feelings of belonging to someone.

"But personally otherwise, every time, my first immigration case has redirected and she's on annual leave. The second one, she was off sick and I had to call a lot of different numbers and no one was helping me. I was doing this all by myself, so I feel so lonely. I did not get the support net I should have to get – it's very hard, you know? (Young Person 7, Age 20, China)

My social worker tries their best to help me to make me happy. They are helping me to get my mum here and my permit. They comfort me. My social worker is like my second father. He is one of a kind. He will do anything for me if I ask him, he will just run and do it. He knows what the problems I have and he is always there. (Young Person 13, Age 17, Eritrea)

Young people also highlighted the importance of social workers showing them that they were also being held in mind as an important anchor for their well-being and as a contrast they highlighted heightened feelings of displacement and unbelonging when this did not happen

"My social worker would phone me every day, am I happy or if I need anything." (Young Person 3, Age, 17, Afghanistan)

In that time, maybe the social worker could have explained things or could have told me to get support but as a new arrival to the UK, I wasn't interested to go anywhere. I was just staying in a room all of the time. I wasn't even going outside for three months. I'm totally sure about that. I wasn't going anywhere, going out or going anywhere because I wasn't with people. I was alone, not seeing anyone, just being indoors. I was going to a little park near the house where I was based, staying one hour and going (Young Person 6, Age 24, Albania)

Social Connections, Vital Spaces and Relations of Recognition and Belonging

Just as positive relationships with professionals were identified by children and young people as central to their well-being, they similarly expressed the significance of opportunities to connect with peers in community settings as equally important for fostering a sense of belonging and integration, or at least a transitional sense of belonging as they navigated periods of waiting for asylum decisions. As can be seen in the quotes below, they identified being connected with peers in and through community as sources of happiness and fun. They highlighted being introduced to specialist refugee youth spaces as socially vital spaces for their recognition. These spaces they spoke of as being characterised by experiential qualities of peer-to-peer care, equality, respect and shared social esteem. These spaces functioned as being counterpoints to broader social experiences of hostility and loneliness, and they also served as spaces where children and young people could experience themselves through their own multi-dimensionality rather than through the single story of their legal identity as asylum seeker or refugee. All these aspects of connection, vitality, and recognition are reflected in the quotes below and as identified in research elsewhere, are fundamental to well-being, integration and supporting recovery (Hynes, Connolly, Duran, Matar and Durr, 2022; Kauhanen and Kaukko, 2020; Kohli, Fylkesnes, Kaukko and White, 2024)

"Because positive people make your future. They make you safe. Also they help you for everything, like they don't leave you like you can do nothing, so it's important, it's very important. " (Young Person 1, Age 17. Afghanistan)

"They do event, like Monday is lesson. Friday is the football. Wednesday is music, dancing, and then Monday is like a lesson class where you go and learn English.....My key worker brought me there and then you come at this time, and then when you go there you find a bunch of people who are like, oh, you feel relieved and all the stress is gone and then. Then you don't

feel lonely which is good. You feel like you are free, no one telling me, you're not welcome."
(Young Person 11, 20, Sudan)

The Recommendations: From Children and Young People

These recommendations are based on the voices of young people involved in this project, either as research participants or as peer researchers and through advisory group membership. They emerged through the research conversations themselves, when participants were asked about what or who helped them the most or how they think things should be changed to make it easier for young people. Several opportunities were also provided for young people to deliberate, develop and prioritise the recommendations set out in the report, both through two collaborative workshops and through several individual conversations with researchers. The recommendations are divided into different themes, and many are targeted at agencies. Here are the top recommendations that the young people collectively felt would be important to emphasise while a full list of recommendations is set out in Appendix B

Arrival

1. All children and young people should be assessed by a psychologist to determine how to provide appropriate trauma-informed care from the very beginning that is relevant to their circumstances. They should also have access to ongoing well-being and therapeutic support so they can get it when they need it.
2. No child or young person should have to face questioning from the police or immigration officials upon arrival. The priority should be protection and allocating children and young people a safe place to rest over and above any other concerns.

Guardianship

3. Children and young people need independent legal guardians from the start and throughout their journey who understand the asylum, immigration, modern slavery and social care processes, who understand the unique challenges that young people face, and who is accessible to young people.

Rights and entitlements

4. All children and young people should receive age-appropriate information about their rights in a format that is accessible to them, in their language at the beginning when they arrive, when they go into care as well as throughout their journey, and not just given information when something happens to them.
5. Social workers to explain to children and young people about what it means to be a corporate parent and what their parent-like duties are in this role. Social workers should explain that they have parental duties.

Social Care

6. As corporate parents, and as any parent would, social workers and personal advisers should be involved in supporting children and young people through the asylum process, such as making sure they understand the process, that they have a good solicitor and someone they trust to attend appointments with them. They should explain children's rights and entitlements throughout the asylum journey or ensure that an expert has explained these things to them in a way that is accessible. They need to oversee the professionals involved in the asylum journey to ensure that the proper procedures are being followed and that their child is getting the best service, as any parent would. All young people need someone to keep what is best for their future in mind.⁷
7. Social workers should familiarise themselves with the profiles, histories and experiences of all children and young people and be consistently prepared before meeting them for the first time. The responsibility to inform the social worker should not be on young people.
8. The law should ensure ongoing care and support for young people up to the age of 25 years no matter what the young person's education or immigration status is. It is often not a young person's fault if they are out of education or haven't regularised their status - this can happen because of poor support from different professionals in the past and delays in the asylum system.

⁷ In developing recommendations for social work, young people were not suggesting that all unaccompanied young people have negative experiences of social work. Rather they were highlighting the importance of good social work practice for positive outcomes, what good practice looks like, and the importance of all young people experiencing good practice to ensure positive outcomes for all. As you will see in the findings, young people spoke of having variable experiences.

9. All social workers, personal advisors, and other social care professionals should respond to young people in a way that shows they are taking ownership of them and to demonstrate parental responsibility.
10. Social services need to consistently provide support for integration and belonging to unaccompanied young people, to prevent loneliness, especially upon arrival. These young people are often very isolated and separated from families and loved ones. They need support from professionals to overcome this and to protect them from other dangers like racism and violence.
11. Social workers and personal advisers are encouraged to take greater responsibility for the information needs of children and young people (linked to recommendation 4).
12. There should be 'knowledge departments' or regional hubs of excellence and support for training and advice for social workers and personal advisors. This would enable professionals to gain peer support and local authority swapping opportunities for social workers to learn about what is happening and get support.

Asylum and international protection

13. The government should take the asylum and international protection decision-making away from the Home Office and give it to independent professionals who know about children and children's circumstances.
14. The asylum decision-making process for children should be trauma-informed and attentive to the grief and loss experienced by child asylum seekers; it should be geared towards the ways in which children understand their lives and circumstances prior to leaving their country of origin rather than being adult-centric, politically and historically focused.
15. Decision-making processes should be faster so that children and young people do not have to spend years waiting to secure their status. But this needs to be done so that young people have enough time to properly prepare for appeals and get good legal representatives. It is not fair that children have 14 days to lodge an appeal, but the Home Office can take years to make a decision on the young person's case.
16. Young people should have the right to work and be supported to go to university in the same way as their peers, so that they can move on with their lives while they wait for an asylum decision (see best interests leave below). These would help young people to integrate as well as helping to empower them with skills and knowledge needed for their future.

Following the in-depth participatory process of supporting young people to develop recommendations, the research team have built on these to make further key policy recommendations below. This is not to diminish young people's important contributions but rather to build on them to maximise the impact of the report:

Policy Recommendations

17. The Government should introduce a system of independent legal guardianship for all unaccompanied / separated children. This should happen promptly, from the moment they come into contact with any authority, and last until a durable solution is reached, even if that extends beyond their childhood.
18. Children should only be subject to age disputes where there is a significant reason to doubt their age and as a measure of last resort where other approaches have been exhausted. Limit Home Office age determinations, and decisions to treat young people asserting they are children as adults on arrival to very exceptional cases (e.g. evidence they are in their late 20's). Where age assessments are conducted as a measure of last resort, appropriate support for the young person should be in place.
19. Children and young people seeking international protection need to be provided with a form of protective leave to remain, meaning being granted secure immigration status as soon as they enter care and having a long-term plan for their recovery and development. This must be based on an individual assessment of each child's best interests taking into account the child's views, needs and concerns, their immediate safety as well as their long-term best interests. A child's best interests should be understood within the whole framework of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989)
20. All children in care should receive early intervention and proactive support from their social workers to ensure they can realise any rights to nationality or permission to stay, and this should be central to the care plan and pathway planning process. Despite the existing legal framework placing duties on local authorities that include providing support to resolve nationality and immigration status, there is nonetheless a need for a more clearly articulated duty to ensure this happens consistently. This could be achieved through amending the Care Planning, Placement and Case Review (England) Regulations 2010. Further to this, statutory guidance should be amended to

include more detailed guidance for social work practitioners on *how* to meet these duties.

21. All children and young people who are in the asylum and immigration system should have timely access to free, expert legal representation which is child-centred and receive the holistic support they need to be able to engage effectively with their legal case. As corporate parents, local authorities have a duty to ensure this, but the Ministry of Justice needs to ensure that looked-after children's entitlement to legal aid is accessible in practice by fixing market failures that result in too few immigration lawyers being available. The Ministry of Justice should also extend eligibility for immigration legal aid to care leavers.
22. To prevent former unaccompanied asylum-seeking care leavers facing destitution and risks of exploitation and other harms when their support is terminated:
 - a. They should receive ongoing section 23C support with no education / training requirements up to the age of 25 years.
 - b. Support under the Children Act (1989) (and equivalent legislation in Scotland and Northern Ireland) should be removed as a category of assistance that can be denied under Schedule 3 of the Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act, (2002)
 - c. However, if there is a decision to terminate Children Act support for any former asylum-seeking care leaver either without immigration leave or with limited leave, it cannot be taken without the Local Authority first supporting the young person to secure legal representation in any immigration or asylum claim they could make.
 - d. Relevant Home Office funding should be extended to resource Local Authorities to continue their support beyond a young person's 21st birthday and up to their 25th birthday.

Appendix A: Analysis of DfE data on care leavers

Table 1 Average number of care leavers who were former unaccompanied asylum-seeking children supported in English region at the end of March each year between 2019 and 2023

English Region	The average number of care leavers receiving support at 31 st March each year between 2019-23			% of care leavers who were former unaccompanied asylum-seeking children supported in that region
Age group	17-18	19-21	Total	
North East	44	74	116	1%
North West	280	520	800	7%
Yorkshire and The Humber	198	424	624	6%
East Midlands	186	476	666	6%
West Midlands	288	700	984	9%
East of England	390	954	1346	12%
London	980	2662	3644	33%
Inner London	402	976	1372	13%
Outer London	580	1688	2268	21%
South East	580	1658	2238	21%
South West	166	340	504	5%
Total number of care leavers who were former unaccompanied asylum-seeking children in England	3,110	7,804	10,916	

Source: 1 Local authority breakdowns were provided to us for each year through an FOI response. We have combined the data for each year to provide an average for each region.

Appendix B: Full list of recommendations

Arrival

1. All children and young people should have a safe space to stay in and rest at the point of arrival.
2. All children and young people should be assessed by a psychologist to determine how to provide appropriate trauma-informed care from the very beginning that is relevant to their circumstances.
3. All children and young people should not be asked straight away about what has happened to them. Their trauma-related needs should be addressed first.
4. Children should not have to go straight to the Home Office upon arrival.
5. Children should not be told straight away that they are an adult upon arrival.
6. No child or young person should have to face hard questioning from the police upon arrival. The priority should be child protection and allocating children a safe place to rest over and above any other concerns.
7. All children should be allocated a solicitor before the arrival interview to ensure they understand their options and that they don't say anything that will be unhelpful for their asylum claim later.
8. All children should be given a trained professional like a guardian to take responsibility for them from arrival onwards.

Social Care

9. Social workers, as corporate parents, need to accompany young people through the process and explain their rights and entitlements.
10. Social workers need to be more involved in supporting children and young people through the asylum process, such as finding good solicitors. They need to oversee the professionals in the process to ensure processes and procedures are being followed and avoid 'drift' that threatens children and young people's futures.
11. The social work role needs to be kept separate from asylum and immigration to ensure that the relationship is not complicated by the asylum process.
12. Every local authority should have an independent advocacy organisation attached to it, which is accessible to asylum-seeking and migrant children and specialises in asylum and immigration laws and policies.
13. Whilst young people recognise this is not always easy to control for, all children and young people should have one social worker throughout. This is important because it is difficult to build relationships and tell your story all the time. Where this is not possible, children and young people should always be kept at the centre of any decisions and processes made when social workers must change.

14. Social workers should familiarise themselves with the profiles, histories and experiences of all children and young people and be prepared before meeting them for the first time. The responsibility to inform the social worker should not be on young people.
15. Peer support / local authority swapping opportunities for social workers to learn about what is happening and for support.
16. Decisions should not be made by money.
17. There should be a care leavers commissioner to oversee what is happening in local authorities.
18. The law should ensure ongoing care and support for young people up to the age of 25 years no matter what your education or immigration status is. It is often not a young person's fault if they are out of education or have missed out on education because they had to flee and seek asylum; being out of education or not having regularised their status can happen because of poor support from different professionals in the past. Getting support and remaining in education is important so young people don't give up, and it makes young people vulnerable.
19. Social workers, personal advisers and other social care professionals should learn from the strengths of young people.
20. Social workers, personal advisors, and other social care professionals should respond to young people - to show they are taking ownership / to demonstrate parental responsibility. They should explain what does parental responsibility mean for working with children and young people from abroad.
21. To support integration / belonging and prevent loneliness, especially at arrival.
22. To take more responsibility for the information needs of children and young people.
23. There should be 'knowledge departments' / regional hubs of excellence and support for training and advice for social workers and personal advisors etc.

Rights and entitlements

24. All children and young people should receive age-appropriate information in a format that is accessible to them, in their language at the beginning when they arrive, when they go into care as well as throughout their journey, and not just given information when something happens to them.
25. There should be a professional who is responsible for making sure that unaccompanied asylum-seeking children and care leavers understand rights and are able to exercise them. This should be separate to the social worker.
26. There should be a rights and entitlements teacher for young people to go to.

27. Social workers should know who to refer to children and young people to for advocacy.
28. Social workers to explain to children and young people about what it means to be a corporate parent and what their parent-like duties are in this role. Social workers need to explain that they have parental duties.

Asylum and international protection

29. Being good or doing well shouldn't be used against you by the Home Office. You shouldn't have to demonstrate being vulnerable to stay in the UK.
30. The asylum decision-making process for children should be trauma-informed and attentive to the grief and loss experienced by child asylum seekers; it should be geared towards the ways in which children understand their lives and circumstances prior to leaving their country of origin rather than being adult-centric, politically and historically focused.
31. There should be a category of status for all children and young people that is based on the convention on the rights of the child - best interests leave. Best interests visa.
32. Change the number of days you have to submit an appeal from 14 days to something that is more realistic.
33. There should be quicker decision-making processes in the Home Office to reduce risks of exploitation and harm and other violations against children and young people.
34. There should be less Home Office driven age-assessment process.
35. Using other evidence sources to take some of the burden off young people - external evidence sources.

Advocacy

36. Children and young people need advocates.
37. Children and young people need to feel safe to speak and have spaces to be listened to.
38. The government should take the decision-making away from the Home Office and to independent professionals who know about children and children's circumstances.

Appendix C: Research conversation semi-structured schedule

As discussed in the methodology section of the report, the research team developed a research conversation schedule with the young people's advisory group and peer researchers of this research project. See below.

The Needs of Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children and Young People in London

March – July 2024

Research conversation plan

Section	Description
Introductions and overview of research	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Introduction between researchers and participants -• Purpose of research conversation: Find out more about the important topic of the needs and experiences of unaccompanied asylum seeking and refugee children and young people in London.- <p>RQs: We are interested in unaccompanied asylum-seeking young people's needs and experiences around:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• The asylum and immigration system (e.g. anything to do with the Home Office) -• The care and protection system (e.g. anything to do with social services)• We are also interested in finding out more about well-being, protection and belonging.• To answer these research questions, the research team will interview around 15 young people aged between 14-25 years old -- Findings will be used in a report for London Councils to be used for lobbying / making change to care and asylum policy and practice.- This research project has been done in partnership with young people who form an advisory group. -- They have advised us on the themes and questions that we are going to be talking about today. So the questions in the conversation today have been decided by them.- The research also involves 2 young researchers with similar experiences to you. They are supporting with the research conversations- No wrong answers; we are interested in your views; you are the expert- We also respect that there may be things you might feel uncomfortable to share and that is OK

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - You are in charge. It is your story. Your experiences. It is your space if you want to share or not share.
Consent	<p>Go through consent form to make sure young person aware of all options esp:-</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What you tell us will be used to write a report and may be used in other outputs like articles, blogs, or evidence submissions. - We would like to record the discussion so that we can remember exactly what you said. But this discussion will only be listened to by 2 members of the research team for the research - Helen and Ilona from University of Bedfordshire and London School of Economics. It won't be shared with your local authority, with the Home Office or with the advisory group. - Generally, we won't share the information you give us with anyone else, but there is one exception, which is if you tell us something that makes us think you are in danger or if anyone else is in danger. In this case, we might have to speak to another professional. - We won't use your real name in report or any articles we write or any info that can identify you. - The form we are asking you to sign explains all this and we are asking you to sign it with your name or your initials to make sure you're happy to take part in the research conversation. It's like an agreement between us to make sure you know what we will do with the information and so that you can make a complaint if you are unhappy with anything. - We will also give you a privacy notice so you know how your data will be stored. - Does the young person have any questions before we get started?
Ice-breaker	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Make young person feel comfortable (Prompts: How are you. How was your journey here to this research conversation today?) - Ask them to introduce themselves e.g. name, age, where they are from and about personal and neutral things such as hobbies or favourite animal, music, interesting thing about their country. - Outline key themes: well-being, protection, integration, their rights and entitlements, the professionals in their life, and how the government and local councils, and others could make things better for young people - But we also want to hear what things are important to you! So the space is also for you to say what you think it is important to say - Before we start the research conversation: Emphasise again that young person is in control of what they say and don't say
Theme 1: Well-being	<p>We are interested in finding out about well-being. To do that we would like to understand first how young people understand what well-being means.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What does well-being mean for you? How important is it and why? <p>When we thought about well-being with the young advisors helping with this research, they thought it was important for us to ask about happiness, health, safety, and relationships.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What makes you happy?

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What makes you worry/what do you worry about?- Do you feel comfortable to talk about your worries and to who? - Do you get any support with your well-being? Who helps you with this? - Prompts: social worker, therapist, personal adviser, charity advocate/support worker / foster carer / teacher. - Prompt: physical and emotional health; sports, hobbies, arts, games, social activities, GP's. Do you have access to nutritious food/ funds to purchase food? - How do your relationships contribute to your well-being/how you feel? - Prompt: Which people are positive in your life and why?
Theme 2: Professionals	<p>We're going to talk about the professionals in your life</p> <p>*Note, some of this may have been covered above so we do not need to repeat anything.</p> <p><u>General Professional Questions</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Which professionals are important to you at the moment, and since you've come to London? And why - Is it the same professionals involved in your life or does this change sometimes? (prompt which ones) - - When you first arrived, did someone explain to you the different professionals you would meet and what their responsibilities are? And what you are to them? Prompts: Do you feel like you understand the differences between professionals and responsibilities? (E.g. SW, PA, FC, solicitor, Refugee Council children's adviser) <p><u>Asylum and Immigration Professionals Questions</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - When you go to Home Office or solicitor appointments, who accompanies you? How is that? - Do you get the support you need through the asylum process - please explain? - - When you talk / spoke with your solicitor, do you / did you understand them? Do they / did they understand you? (Follow-up: Do you feel like you have / had the option to change?) - If you were interviewed by the HO, do you think you were given the opportunity to express yourself? Are you able to say how it was? - <p><u>Care and Protection Professional Questions</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Do you know who is responsible for taking care of you and making decisions with you and about you? <p>Prompt: do you know who your legal guardian is? How is / was your experience with your social worker/PA? How is / was your experience with foster carers/key workers? Prompts: about do you feel happy with your assigned social worker/foster carer/key worker/therapist/solicitor etc. Do you feel like you are getting enough/the right kind of support?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What are the things that professionals do that make you feel safe? Or unsafe? - If you're not sure about how to solve a problem with your asylum / immigration case or care, or application, who would you go to?

Theme 3: Rights and entitlements	<p>We are interested in finding out about rights and entitlements.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - When you first arrived, who helped you to understand your rights and to settle in? - What about now. Do you know your rights and is there someone to help you understand them? Are there still things you are unsure about? - <p>Prompts: Where would you go to help you? Where would you go now? Did you have access to a Refugee Council children's adviser or any other organisations to help you understand your rights for asylum? How the asylum system works?</p> <p>Prompt: What about trafficking/NRM/child trafficking guardian? (if applicable)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - How did you access a solicitor and when? - - Were / are experts involved in your case? E.g. country experts, medical/psychological experts, trafficking experts. Did this / does this help / would this have helped? Were you / made you aware of the importance of having experts? Who informed you about this.- - Did solicitors help you to get supporting statements for your case? - Were you / are you happy with your solicitors and the advice you got? <p>Who helps you to understand your care rights? At the beginning and now</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -
Theme 4: Protection	<p>When young people arrive in the UK, they arrive to be protected.</p> <p>What does protection mean for you?</p> <p>Are you / have you been protected by the asylum system? Can you explain this more?</p> <p>(prompt on having papers and what that means for moving forward with life. Prompt on the process and the system, including age assessments)</p> <p>Who makes you feel protected and why?</p> <p>Prompt: who can you turn to, who does it feel safe to share your story with (social work, solicitor, foster carer, therapist, youth groups organisations / friends and GP, do you know how to protect yourself and who to speak to if you feel unsafe? (consider this last point in well-being)</p> <p>Young advisors supporting us in this research have let us know that trust is important for protection. Do you agree and who do you trust to look out for you?</p> <p>Do you feel protected generally? Do you feel safe / protected in the area where you live / in London?</p>
Theme 5: Integration	<p>Integration needs:</p> <p>Q Have you heard the word integration before – (do you know what it means? Explore) -</p> <p>Our advisory group explained integration as community, of having positive relationships, and being able to go to school / college and work and take part in hobbies etc. So we have some questions here that they thought of</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do you feel like you belong to your community- (prompt with / out your status/papers? Does your community support you? Are you able to get involved in activities in your community? (prompt: what activities are important and why?)

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do you feel welcomed in London? - • Are you supported to go school / college? • (Prompts: Do school / college support you? If not in college, do have any other learning opportunities? • Are there opportunities for meeting with young people with similar experiences? Is this important? Why? (prompt friendships,)
Theme 6: Solutions	<p>Solutions:</p> <p>One of the things that we would like to happen from this research is to take ideas for recommendations and solutions to people that have the power to change things. So we would like to get your thoughts on solutions.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are there things in asylum and immigration system that you think need to be changed? And why? • Are there things in social work and local authorities that need to be changed and why?) • How can systems prepare young people for a better future? (What do you need to get you where you want to be?) • What has worked well for you? What can systems and professionals learn from this? What service has helped you and what can services and professionals learn from this? -
Closing discussion:	<p>Thank you for being part of this research conversation.-</p> <p>How are you feeling? Do you need any support after this?</p> <p>Do you have anything interesting planned after this research conversation?</p> <p>We will keep you informed about the findings. That is important.</p> <p>Get some nice chocolate nicely wrapped to give to the young person. -</p> <p>Vouchers to say thank you</p>

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