NICEC
National Institute for Careers Education and Counselling

Paul Hamlyn Foundation

connexions
LEICESTER SHIRE

HELPING YOUNG ASYLUM SEEKERS TO PLAN LEARNING AND WORK

Final project report, April 2009

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Young asylum-seekers, whether here with their families or on their own, face particular difficulties in making career plans, caused in part by the timing of the decisions about their refugee status which cut across secondary and further education transitions. But the greatest challenge of all is that they do not know what they are planning for. Will they get leave to remain when they reach the age of 18?

Between April 2007 and March 2009, a two-year project explored the help needed by young asylum-seekers to plan learning and work. Young refugees and asylum-seekers themselves designed the questionnaires, carried out the interviews, and analysed the results. Staff at Connexions Leicester Shire and researchers from the National Institute for Careers Education and Counselling worked with them to explore whether young asylum-seekers were getting the help they needed with education and training decisions.

A range of agencies work with young asylum-seekers to help them make decisions about education, training and future work. What do the young people think of that help? Who else ought to be involved? While the project has special relevance to the City of Leicester where the fieldwork took place, this report offers recommendations to the professionals concerned, and the various local government departments, elsewhere, as well as to national government.

What is most important to you now?

> **'Getting an education and a job to support myself …to be someone in the future.'**[1]

A summary of this paper, in the form of a NICEC Briefing, is available from www.nicec.org.uk

[1] Extracts and quotations in blue are taken from a presentation on 5 December 2008 by Sokol Hoxha and Rosie Ilunga on findings by the young refugee and asylum-seeker researchers, under the auspices of Connexions Leicester Shire.

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1. THE CONTEXT

> *'But overall it is more like being in no man's land, floating up in the air - you don't know where you will land.'*

Young people growing up in England today need to acquire skills and confidence through their secondary school years to make realistic career plans. They are encouraged to explore their interests and aptitudes, look at options for further or higher education and plan how they might eventually earn their living. The people who help them with this include their teachers at school and college (subject teachers, but also form tutors and career specialists), the Connexions service, their family and their wider social network. Career and life planning is important for all young people in the 11 to 19 age range and especially so for those between 15 and 18, exactly the period in which young asylum-seekers are at their most vulnerable. This project aimed to understand better the complexity of the situation in which young asylum seekers find themselves, then try to equip professionals and others to work more effectively with young asylum seekers on their career planning.

Young asylum-seekers themselves carried out the part of the study that explored the experience of their peers, providing real insight into the issues important to them. But added to that, information from slightly older asylum-seekers and refugees, and from the wide range of agencies involved in the study, underlined and cross-validated the issues mentioned by the young people. In this report we present the data from each of the three sources, and draw them together at the end in a set of targeted recommendations.

The target group. In this project, we asked how different career planning might be for young asylum-seekers. We focused on young people between the age of 11 and 18 who were on their own as asylum-seekers (Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children, UASCs), and also the children in the same age group with families (Accompanied Asylum-Seeking Children, AASCs) who were awaiting a decision.

- What choices do they have about education and training and what additional hurdles do they face, if any?
- Who helps them make those choices and could that help be improved?

This first section looks at the background issues that will help understand the data we collected in the three parts of the project. It is illustrated by quotations from the young asylum-seekers interviewed by their peers.

The choices. While waiting for their eighteenth birthday all young asylum-seekers are entitled to full-time education and the other sources of support available to young UK nationals. A priority is to learn English.

> *If you can't speak English, you can't solve your own problems.'*

> *'I want to improve my English, and then I can decide what subject is good for me. The important thing is to improve my English.'*

But depending on the age at which they arrive they must also make choices about learning programmes in secondary school, and then where and what to study after 16. Then they have to make a plan that can be put into operation if they get a positive decision at 18.

But their plans have to take into account another possible future: they may be sent back to the country they left. So the plan must hold good for both possibilities ('parallel planning'[2]). In some cases, even when they reach 18, it takes time to confirm a decision or carry it out, so young people can be left for a year or more after 18 unable to implement any plan. It is hard to plan for this, but it is certain that they need particular help during those years.

> *'The important thing is they accept me or not. If I stay, I continue to study, and choose my course and subjects. I can do nothing in Afghanistan. Maybe prison, maybe somewhere else.'*

At the age of 17½, half-way through any two-year course in further education, their case must be presented to the UK Border Agency (UKBA) so that a decision can be taken and implemented on their eighteenth birthday.

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[2] Kane, S (2006) *Needs Assessment and Planning for Asylum Seeking and Refugee Young People:*
A good practice note. London: National Children's Bureau

The challenges

Discontinuities at age 16. At age 16, in some Local Authorities young people move from a secondary school to a sixth form or further education college. Here they may do a one- or two-year course, and then some make the transition to higher education at 18 or 19. These transitions are challenging for all young people.

UASCs at 16 in addition may leave their foster-carer and go into a hostel or other accommodation. Some UASCs, who have been moved by the UK Border Agency between Local Authorities for secondary schooling, are returned to their original LA at 16 where they may have few contacts.

AASCs too have new problems at 16. Child Benefit is discontinued, and they are not entitled to Educational Maintenance Allowance.

Uncertainties about age. The actual age of young asylum-seekers can be subject to debate. People fleeing their country often have no chance to collect identification documents before they leave. On arrival in the UK the precise age of a young asylum-seeker is key: if they have no documentation, they undergo examinations. This is an inexact science: one medical expert recently said that it is possible to confirm an age within an accuracy of two years[3]. Even this is disputed by others: physical and social development can be advanced or slowed by levels of nutrition and stress, and sometimes be advanced in some ways and slowed in others. Major transitions happen in rapid succession at 16, 17½ and 18: misjudgement by one year can make a significant difference to the life of an individual.

Frequently young people have to wait for a decision for several months and this can have disastrous consequences. A 15-year-old may spend the whole of that school year waiting for a decision without their entitlement to foster care or secondary education. A 16-year-old may miss out on any help while the months tick away and they then come up to the time when their case is reviewed at 17½.

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[3] Guardian, 10.3.09 'Court to decide whether Afghan seeking asylum is a boy aged 15 – or a man'. Dr Diana Birch 'who has made more than 500 assessments, says she can pinpoint age to within two years. But some in her own profession dispute this.'

Additional hurdles. Individual children may have particular problems. It is important to bear these in mind, but without assuming they will affect all.

Possible lack of education so far . Some young asylum-seekers arrive from countries where educational provision has never existed, or has broken down, or from which for some reason they have been excluded. They arrive here full of hope but in some cases with little understanding of what might be involved.

> *'Because in my country there is no college - no school.'*

> *'In Afghanistan I couldn't even go to school because I was a girl - my father taught me at home.'*

The effect of distress. Some young people have additional needs if they are to make any plans at all. Research[4] suggests that we need to be reasonably clear about our past if we are to plan the future. Until a young person has managed to digest and understand the path that took them as a child, through catastrophe and a dangerous journey, to an unfamiliar foreign country, it can be particularly difficult for them to think beyond the immediate present. Their ability to respond appropriately even to the present may be impaired[5].

> *'I can't say, because I don't have a decision - I don't know where I will be - I don't know what is my future.'*

It is in this fractured and disoriented state, and with uncertainty hanging over their medium-term future and having to learn a new language, that young asylum-seekers or their families must establish basic living arrangements, build up social relationships, and make sensible decisions about schooling or training options for the precious few years that they stay in the UK.

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[4] Horsdal, M (2007) 'Therapy and narratives of self' in West, L, Arheit, P, Anderson, A S and Merrill, B, *Using Biographical and Life History Approaches in the Study of Adult and Lifelong Learning: European perspectives*. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang (pp 187-203)
Flum, H (2008) 'Young immigrants' patterns of future orientation'. Paper presented at an ESRC Seminar, 'Career Migration: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Career and Migration' at the University of Loughborough

[5] Papadopoulos, R K (2006) 'Refugees and psychological trauma: psychosocial perspectives' www.ncb.org.uk/dotpdf/open%20access%20-%20phase%201%20only/arc_1_10refandpsych.pdf.
Also, fieldwork interview with Professor P Vostanis, Professor of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, at the Greenwood Institute of Child Health, Leicester

What informal help is available with plans for education or training?

Both UASCs and AASCs are entitled to help from schools and colleges, and the Connexions service. These and some of the other agencies with a statutory responsibility to help are described in section 3c. Other kinds of help available to UK-born children can be more limited for asylum-seeking young people.

Family. This is the main difference between UASCs and AASCs, but there are problems for both.

Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children. UASCs do not have the supportive emotional base of close family in this country. Under the age of 16 they are allocated to foster parents, and then if assessed as being ready, willing and able, over that age they move into hostels or other independent accommodation. Then they have the support of a specialist social worker and, in Leicester at the time of the project, the support of a specialist Connexions Personal Adviser (PA) (see section 3c below).

Accompanied asylum-seeking children. AASCs have family support but often parents are having to deal with the distress for themselves at the same time as look after children (and sometimes a spouse needs support too). This is a difficult family environment in which to grow up. The families may need help in understanding the educational system or indeed the labour market of a western European country. The parents themselves are not permitted to work and will be anxious about their application for asylum. While still waiting for a UKBA decision, asylum-seeking families do not receive the help of Social Services but more limited support from a local agency designated by the National Asylum Support Service (NASS) (in the case of Leicester this is Refugee Action). They can only offer very basic advice about education.

Refugee Community Organisations. In place of the wider social networks available to most UK residents, asylum-seeker families and UASCs often have the support of their own national community, sometimes called (though not usually by themselves) refugee community organisations (RCOs). People from Somalia, say, or Afghanistan, meet together for mutual support and over time are able to set up arrangements to help their own communities.

RCOs are often especially concerned about young compatriots here without their families. If they are able to find premises, they will arrange ESOL classes, sport and cultural activities. They are not always well placed to give careers advice, but they impart strong cultural values about the importance of education, and they want their young people to do well. They are an important source of support and information for the parents of AASCs.

Others talked about the importance of meeting people from their own cultures. One said that they found a church where a lot of people from their country went. They said that is where most of their friendships came from, and that they were helpful, saying that it 'makes me feel like I'm with family'.

Refugee support agencies. Also important are the agencies, usually in the voluntary sector but often funded through local authority grants, who help refugee families with essential practical matters once they get their positive decision. Many of these refugee support agencies are able to provide some advice also to asylum-seekers.

Community and faith groups. All over the country, individual community organisations, churches, mosques and others initiate centres and groups which either directly target asylum-seeking individuals or families, or include them among those they help. This can include such things as a youth club, or help with English, or family support, any of which can informally provide information or advice about learning and work.

Other people. In addition to RCOs and refugee support agencies, a recurrent theme in our project was 'the kindness of strangers', many of whom were, or had been, asylum-seekers themselves though not necessarily from the same country as the recipient.

These 'friends' helped them by giving them money, places to stay, taking them to places they didn't know how to get to, or to appointments. One young person said he didn't have friends, but that he met another asylum seeker at the hostel who 'Showed me every thing like where to play football and how to get to and from town'.

With this background in mind, the project aims were to look at the challenges as perceived by the young people themselves in the City of Leicester, and how the local agencies were able to respond.

In chapter 3 the experience of young asylum-seekers with these groups and with other professionals is explored, and also the thoughts of those professionals about the support they are able to offer.

2. HOW THE PROJECT WAS CARRIED OUT

Fieldwork took place in the City of Leicester and around between June 2007 and November 2008. Activities were divided between the two partner organisations as follows:

a) The team of six young researchers, themselves refugees or asylum-seekers, were trained over a period of four months by a team from the Connexions Service with experience in research methods as well as in working with young researchers on other projects. The young researchers then drafted a questionnaire and piloted it with each other and with peers. The questionnaire used pictures as well as text to help where there were language problems[6]. It explored what help they had needed, what they had received and from whom, how useful it was, and what further help they would like. The team used it with 18 UASCs and AASCs, from Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq, North Korea, Somalia and Zimbabwe who ranged in age from 15 to 19. A Connexions staff member was present at each interview.

b) Project workers from the National Institute for Careers Education and Counselling (NICEC) met two groups of young adults (ten in all) who had been through the experience of seeking asylum, to ask what they felt would have helped them. They came from Iraq, Congo, Eritrea and Somalia.

c) Then over an eighteen month period NICEC researchers talked with staff from:

Leicester City schools
Leicester Further Education College
The City's Minority Ethnic Language Achievement Service, and its equivalent in Leicester County (the Ethnic Minority Achievement Support Service)
Connexions
Social Services
The Youth Service
The Library Service
The pilot Integrated Youth Support Service
The City Council
Refugee Action
The Refugee and Asylum Seekers Advice Project

[2] The training programme and questionnaire are available from ruthhawthorn@btopenworld.com.

The Greenwood Institute of Child Health
The community on-line newspaper, Citizens' Eye whose supplement HAT News[7] provides a platform for local asylum-seeker and refugee groups.

NICEC also met with representatives from three of the refugee communities in Leicester: the Afghan community, the Kurdish community and the Somali Development Services (one of several Somali groups in Leicester).

In preparing their questions for these helping agencies, the two NICEC researchers carried out a literature search. In addition to the many Home Office and Refugee Council publications, they found work by Save the Children[8] and Rutter[9] for the UK, and by Hamilton and Moore in New Zealand[10] particularly helpful in their specific questions about planning education and work. The work of the National Children's Bureau Asylum-seeking Children project[11] was helpful especially in clarifying protocols between Social Services and other agencies for UASCs. At the time of preparing this report, Refugee and Migrant Justice published an account of the problems faced by young asylum-seekers[12] that confirmed at a national level many of our findings from Leicester.

Also early in the project they visited a centre for young asylum-seekers in nearby Loughborough, the Dreamers project, which had came out of the Youth Service there and was formed to fill some of the gaps in the lives of young asylum-seekers in that town.

An event towards the end of the project at which the young researchers presented their findings, many of the agencies interviewed were represented as well as others NICEC researchers had not been able to contact in person. This included a housing officer from a hostel where many UASCs over 16 are housed.

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[3] HAT (Here and There) News, www.hatnews.org.
[4] Save the Children (2006) *Unaccompanied refugees and asylum seekers turning 18.* Formerly on the Save the Children website, now unavailable
[5] Rutter, J (2006) *Refugee Children in the UK*. Maidenhead: Open University Press (second edition)
[6] Hamilton, R and Moore, D, eds. (2004) *Educational Interventions for Refugee Children: Theoretical perspectives and implementing best practice*. London: RoutledgeFalmer
[7] Asylum-seeking Children Project *www.**ncb**.org.uk/**arc**/*
[8] Refugee and Migrant Justice (2009) *Does every child matter? Children seeking asylum in Britain.* London: RMJ. http://refugee-migrant-justice.org.uk/downloads/RMJ_Doeseverychild_Report2.pdf

During the final months of the project, the City Council received the findings with interest. NICEC was invited to present the project findings to a meeting of the City Council's Multi-Agency Forum and after the end of the project in March 2009, to the Council's New Arrivals' Strategy Group. A final dissemination event is planned with financial support from the Council's Community Cohesion Fund. This has two aims: to share the recommendations of the project with a wider audience, and to stimulate one or more local initiatives to support young asylum-seekers in the city itself.

iii. The target group

Numbers. From early in the study it became clear that there were differences in the problems, and help available, for our young people depending which group they fell into, as AASC, UACS; and age and gender.

	UASCs	AASCs
16 to 18		
Under 16		

It proved difficult to gauge the size of any of these groups.

Social Services had 17 UASCs on their books in the City of Leicester who were 17 or under, including 3 under 16, in the summer of 2007. They knew that there were UASCs in the city who were registered with other authorities (though did not know more about them or how many there were). They had a further 14 on their books who were over 18.

Connexions had information on its database about 29 asylum-seeking children under 18, of whom 4 were under 16, but did not distinguish between UASCs and AASCs. They also had records of 13 asylum-seekers aged 18, that is, perhaps not granted leave to remain but still staying on in the city. Connexions had records too of 7 asylum-seekers living in the City but registered in 'other' authorities.

While it is not easy to be sure of UASC numbers, it is much harder to arrive at a figure for AASCs. Social Services has no responsibility for asylum-seeking families. Instead, in every centre a local body receives NASS[13] funds to provide them with practical help. In Leicester that body

[9] The National Asylum Support Service, www.asylumsupport.info/nass.htm

is Refugee Action. They told us that in 2008 they saw 46 clients who described themselves as lone parents and 48 clients who described themselves as 'with family' (two parents and at least one child). But they did not keep figures on numbers of children or their ages, or where they lived. While the 'vast majority' of these families are in Leicester City, their remit covers Leicestershire, Northamptonshire and Rutland. That gives something under 94 asylum-seeking households with children in them.

The Refugee and Asylum Seekers Advice Project (RASAP) was able to give us some idea of numbers of *refugee* families in Leicester, that is, families and children who have passed through the asylum-seeking stage in recent years. They had 53 households on their books in which there were two parents with children, and a further 83 in which there was a single parent and children, 136 families in all. Importantly for our calculations of AASC numbers, they told us that the majority of families they work with contain more than 4 children.

If family size is roughly equivalent for asylum-seekers, that could give a figure of 376 AASCs under Refugee Action's auspices, of which, say, 300 (a further rough estimate for the impression of 'vast majority') could be in Leicester City.

Gender. Again, figures are confusing although Social Services and Connexions both show fewer girls than boys. Social Services figures for 2007 showed a ratio of 3:1. Connexions data shows the same ratio for the few under 16s on their books, but 3:2 for 16 and 17-year olds.

This difference may reflect the fact that Connexions figures include AACSs, that is, young people here with family groups. It is possible that girls are more likely to arrive in the UK under the protection of their families. The young people who survive the journey on their own through to registration with the UKBA and then Social Services, are more likely to be boys. Fewer girls may start on this perilous journey, but also trafficking (and therefore disappearance from official figures) may be more likely to affect girls.

3. MAIN FINDINGS

a) THE YOUNG RESEARCHERS

This section is a summary of a paper presented to a meeting towards the end of the project in which the young researchers[14] shared their findings with the helping agencies concerned with young asylum-seekers (many of the participants had by then been interviewed by the NICEC team and were strongly committed to understanding their work from the perspective of the young people themselves).

Loneliness and anxiety. Although mixed with the relief of being away from physical danger, UASCs experienced acute loneliness and anxiety:

> *'I felt alone, and sad, no understand anything. I didn't know what I could do. I felt safe, only safe.'*

> *'[I felt] shocked and so scared about what I was going to do in the future- what to do - and was thinking where am I going to sleep tonight and what would I eat - I had no money'*

Age challenges. While help is available some had experienced delay for reasons that included UKBA challenges on their age. As explained, this can have serious consequences including missing out on whole sections of their education.

> *Another young person said if they had more help getting into education, they would be at Uni by now. This led to a big discussion between the young person and myself [a young researcher aged 19, granted leave to remain and in his first year at University] because they are the same age as me and arrived at the same time, but we are now in very different circumstances.*

Lack of understanding of what help is available. Some individual staff in the helping agencies are excellent.

> *'Really helpful - in my country I never heard of any thing like social services'*

[10] The data was analysed and presented by Sokol Hoxha and Rosie Ilunga with support from Eileen Cusey.

But the problem is that young asylum-seekers themselves do not know what to expect so when they do not get such good help they do not know they could hope for more, or how to go about seeking it.

He arrived when he was 14 and a duty social worker put him in a hostel with adults and he wasn't put in education. When he was 17 he got a new social worker. This one helped him to go to college, and get Jobseekers Allowance. He is very happy now with his present Social Worker.

Lack of inter-agency collaboration. Alongside material needs, decisions about schooling or training are crucial to assimilation. Not enough agencies know about the help Connexions is there to give with this, and even where someone in the agency knows it, not all individual staff members are aware.

The young people interviewed said their referral to Connexions came from Social Services, foster carers, supported housing, NASS, college, Jobcentre Plus, friends, family and school[15].

We think that this is good in one way because it means a lot of people know that Connexions can help, but at the same time it doesn't seem consistent. If all young refugees have a Social Worker first and they know that Connexions can help, then why aren't all the referrals from Social services?

Interpretation. There is an urgent need for more help with interpretation.

One person told us that she ended up moving around a lot and this was due to many misunderstandings that could have been avoided if there was more access to interpreters.

Another told us about how he was robbed by someone in his hostel, but when he went to the police station he couldn't report it properly. He was then robbed a second time by the same person, but didn't even try to report it, because he knew he wouldn't be able to explain it.

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[11] None of the young people in the study mentioned a 'Pathway Plan' (see Social Services in section 3 c)

The telephone Language Line used by some of the agencies is not easily accessible for the young person themselves (and Connexions staff said to NICEC researchers that Language Line interpreters do not have enough specialist knowledge of the issues to provide a reliable service).

Continuity of support - the need for a single champion, mentor, or guardian who will stay with them through to 18 and beyond. One of the young researchers had been particularly lucky in the foster parent who took him in when he first arrived and then stayed in touch as a friend when he moved on. Others in the study longed for such a single source of information and encouragement.

'It would be better if you had one person to help you with everything. To explain college, housing, everything: one person instead of having a social worker, a Connexions worker, and a housing support worker.'

All of the concerns identified by the young researchers were confirmed by our other two groups of respondents, the young adult refugees and people in the helping agencies.

ii. YOUNG ADULTS WHO HAD BEEN THROUGH THE EXPERIENCE

We held two focus groups for young adult refugees, ten people in all, asking them to reflect on their experiences when they first arrived in the UK and what had happened to them since, to try to understand what might be confronting our under 18s now. They were all young men, whose countries of origin were Iraq, Congo, Eritrea and Somalia. Not all had been under 18 when they first arrived, but several of their insights were relevant to our target group. One had arrived aged 17 and been delayed by challenges to his age so had not been able to enter full-time education. Some had been successful in their application, some were appealing against negative decisions, and some had been refused asylum and had all support cut off.

They said themselves it might help the young people in our target group to know more what it might be like for them a few years down the road.

i. Barriers

Lack of interpretation services. They said that when they had first arrived with very little English some professionals (including doctors) had preferred not to get an interpreter, which is time-consuming and expensive

to arrange, but struggled on with the young person's poor English, perhaps assuming they understood more than they did.

Their comments on the Language Line confirmed those expressed in the peer research. It may seem like a solution from the point of view of the helping agency, but is no substitute for a face-to-face interpreter from the point of view of the refugee.

There was also a lack of specialist interpreters in the minority languages in Leicester (for example, no Tigrignia for Eritreans)

Lack of collaboration between agencies. They thought there was too much focus on what the boundaries of responsibility are for each agency (even between subdivisions of the same agency, including Social Services). This problem is increased where there is high staff turnover. A real and serious result is that young people slip through the gaps.

One pointed out that young people whose frameworks are repeatedly shattered are more susceptible to anti-social influences: they may get into trouble with the police, or disappear into the informal economy or worse. Social Services and Connexions could work more closely with each other to ensure that when one staff member leaves someone in the other service could provide better continuity.

ii. Sources of help

Social Services. One had experienced a social worker who had not believed his story, which made the young UASC mistrust all social workers. Another found the turnover of staff so great that (he said) young people in that Local Authority area rarely saw the same person twice. Neither of these experiences took place in Leicester but these stories underscore the importance of continuity.

Refugee Community Organisations (RCOs). One said his had been very helpful, but there were some problems. It is possible that an RCO may represent your nationality or language group, but the members may belong to a different and hostile community within it. One said he had not been able to make much use of his RCO because it was too far out of town to be able to reach. The Eritreans told us their community is so small there is as yet no RCO to serve their needs.

Further education colleges. One had got into college on arrival at 17 and was still studying, and another said that once he got to college, it was

a teacher there who encouraged him to go for higher education. 'Once you get to know people they start to take an interest in you.'

Faith groups. One man said he wished he had come to Leicester first, rather than London, as it is smaller. He said that people were more likely to help each other, and there appeared to be more helping agencies, but also it was easier to find the mosque which had been a source of help for him.

Families. These young adults, a mixture of those who had come with family members and those who had come on their own, thought having family here was a major advantage. One had come on his own, but joined his mother and brothers, and she had advised him. Another had had advice from a brother already here who had given him a sensible action plan: learn English, then get skills, then go for jobs, in a step-by-step sequence. Simple advice, and perhaps what was most important was someone to help make each successive decision according to the strategy.

Friends. One Somalian had benefited greatly from the fact that there were people in London who had known him at home who had been able to vouch for him. The strong commitment to fellow countrymen was underlined by one of our participants who said how bad he felt that he could not do more to help others, but was finding it hard to survive himself on his £35 weekly benefit.

Individual personality. This was not discussed as such but emerged from the stories told. Some individuals are inevitably less self-assured than others, but some have had experiences that so severely undermined their confidence it appeared to be harder for them to make use of the help that is available.

iii. What they would have liked

Handouts, in simple, clear language with relevant local contact addresses. Examples they gave that would have helped were:

- A simple handout at the first Home Office point-of-entry interview on where to go for help with basic needs. Even for people with reasonable English there is too much to take in at one time and it is better to have the information in writing to digest slowly.

- Advice on overcoming problems getting work. These included finding a job without a reference or previous UK experience; and the very real problems of the informal economy. Given the reality that many will get their first work in this shadowy world, rather than just advice against it, they needed realistic advice about the potential hazards. Such employers are not only able to pay below minimum wage, but they use many ruses not to pay what is owed. It would be much better to be forewarned about these.

English friends. One befriending scheme that had operated in Leicester had run out of funds. One young Iraqi Kurd talked about how shy he felt and how much he longed for friends, particularly an English friend with whom he could check out things he did not understand on an informal basis.

Role models. One of our participants said that young refugees desperately need role models. Even those who are fortunate enough to have families can spend much of their time in their homes with parents out at work, and not ever meet people who have made it.

Voluntary work. One in the group described his first two years in the UK when he could not get work, but spent them trying to help others. This gave him experience of how all the UK systems (police, DSS, Housing, libraries etc) worked. He said that one advantage of the UK, unlike some other countries, is that friends and advocates are often welcomed to official interviews, and the person accompanying can benefit from this as well as the person receiving the help.

c) DISCUSSIONS WITH THE HELPING AGENCIES

The NICEC team arranged to meet as many agencies as possible whose work was relevant to the young asylum-seekers, following up leads and suggestions over the lifetime of the project.

Connexions. At the start of the project, Connexions Leicester Shire appointed a Personal Adviser (PA) with responsibility for UASCs who played a key part in this project. He knew his group and their challenges well and was able to encourage them to take part. There was not such a close understanding of the whereabouts or needs of AACSs, as no one PA was responsible for this group. At a group discussions with other PAs attached to schools and with other specialisms, they said they were keen

to help their young asylum-seeking clients but would themselves like a source of specialist help, including ideally a colleague with expertise in the needs of AASCs as well as UASCs.

They also would like a quick link to a website that would provide up-to-date, user-friendly information on legal issues and sources of help (national as well as local), and face-to-face interpretation services. They would welcome a straightforward protocol on working with possible AASCs given their experience, confirmed by teachers, that AASCs may wish to keep their status quiet (but see the views on this of the refugee support agency director below).

Integrated Youth Support Services (IYSS). This initiative was being piloted during the life of the project, but in an area of the City with few known asylum-seeking families. Staff agreed that when rolled out to other areas of the City it had potential for identifying and supporting asylum-seeking families. The Common Assessment Framework (CAF) is used to explore and collect detailed information about young people (this includes the refugee status of their family). In cases where enough CAF indicators suggest the child may have problems, a 'team around the child' of helping agencies meets to discuss possible solutions with the child and their parent or guardian. This team may include Connexions PAs and also social workers. IYSS staff indicated they too would welcome training on the needs of UASCs and AASCs. However there was some concern that training resources available during the pilot were to be reduced once it was extended to the whole city. The needs of asylum-seeking children were important but would have to take their place among other vulnerable groups.

Social Services. A team of three social workers shared the support of UASCs in Leicester during the period of the project, and they had a strong relationship with the young people on their list. We met them and their line manager, and the social workers' support and understanding of their problems was very apparent. Social Services also has teams that work with young people in care, so different social workers support foster families. Social Services does not have a responsibility for asylum-seeking families.

We noted that none of the young people in the study mentioned a 'Pathway Plan'[16] which must be completed for any young person leaving

[12] For an explanation of Pathway Plans and Personal Education Plans, see www.everychildmatters.gov.uk/

care, including a UASC. The rubric says that among the people who should be consulted 'unless there is an exceptional reason not to do so' is the Connexions PA. The Connexions PA for UASCs told us he had never been involved in such a discussion. The Plan includes details about learning intentions. It is supposed to be updated every six months, and the young person should have a copy of it. The Connexions PA with responsibility for UASCs told us he had never been involved in such a consultation.

During the second summer of the project in August 2008, the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) announced a pilot project to extend the period of fostering beyond the age of 18[17]. This could be of real benefit to young asylum seekers who remain in this country after that age, either because of a positive decision or where an expulsion cannot be implemented.

Social support for asylum-seeking families. The role of advice on practical matters is contracted out from NASS to local refugee support agencies: in Leicester this is the voluntary sector organisation, Refugee Action. Refugee Action told NICEC that their resources are very limited and do not extend to the sort of one-to-one help offered to UASCs. Links between the NASS-designated agency and the Connexions service would enable Connexions at least to know where AASCs were and explore whether they would like help. Refugee Action does not have the resources to take this forward, so any action would have to be initiated by Connexions.

Refugee Community Organisations. This term implies a network of well-organised, vibrant and well-informed voluntary-sector bodies able to step in to fill any gaps left by statutory agencies. This may be true in larger cities but in Leicester and perhaps in other smaller centres there appeared to be a significant variation in the power of the RCOs to help, linked in part to the number of years over which any nationality group had been coming to the UK.

It takes time for sufficient numbers of new arrivals to solve their own problems and learn enough about their host nation in order to be able to

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[13] Staying Put pilots 'will give children in care the chance to benefit from a stable family placement so that they only move to independent living when they feel properly prepared and ready. This will allow children in care to make the transition to adulthood in a more gradual way, just like other young people who rely on their families for this type of support.' www.dcsf.gov.uk/pns/DisplayPN.cgi?pn_id=2008_0115. The need of UASCs for such support would appear clear to anyone working in this field.

find premises, seek support from the local council, and raise other funds to be able to set up the kind of services they would like to offer.

In addition, many community-based helping initiatives are only transitory. At the start of the project we made an internet search of agencies available for refugees in Leicester. It came up with many services that were already defunct. This may be because funding was temporary, but other factors may be involved. One staff member at a refugee support agency described how, although help is available to guide an RCO through the process of formalising itself as an organisation, such as drafting a constitution, so that it can apply for funding, help is still needed in actually making applications and seeing them through, and progressing to the stage of providing support for others. Perhaps for this reason there are several organisations that exist only in name.

In Leicester the **Kurdish** and **Afghani** communities were keen to help and were achieving remarkable things, but much of their time was taken up with securing premises from which to do this. Some on whose energies this work depended were themselves insecure, waiting for Home Office decisions and therefore with very limited personal funds as they are precluded from doing paid work. Others with newly obtained refugee status had less time to spare from other commitments. All were working as hard as they could but with these pressures they were understandably not yet connected with all the statutory agencies that could help.

The **Somali** community, by contrast, with a presence in Leicester over a longer period, had several different organisations. The one we visited had paid staff, a house in which they ran a variety of activities, and were well linked to City services. The worker we met, herself originally a refugee, had trained as a social worker in the Netherlands before coming to the UK so had a good understanding of western European life. However, funding for their specific activities was only temporary and they had recently had to close an educational programme for their young people.

Better outreach by Connexions and others to these RCOs would give a significant return on effort, as RCOs are in touch with, and are trusted by, so many of the families and UASCs that need their help. Most importantly they provide advice in the relevant languages and could offer interpretation help to Connexions staff.

Representatives that we spoke to from the three communities, including parents, described the high value placed by their culture on education, and mentioned the fear felt by some families that if their children mixed

too much with local English children, there was a danger that the apparent indigenous indifference to education might rub off on them.

This protective instinct seems to be an important difference in the experience of AASCs. UASCs are exposed to far more direct contact with everything English, including statutory agencies, so their experience of integration, though sometimes desperately troubled, can be more rapid and thorough.

Refugee support agencies. We spoke to managers and staff at Refugee Action and at the Refugee and Asylum Seekers Advice Project (RASAP). Refugee Action told us of additional problems for AASCs resulting from sudden school moves. This can arise, for example, when newly-arrived families initially find accommodation with friends or relations, but then this breaks down. They are then entitled to accommodation through NASS but will have no choice over where they are sent. Further problems arise if asylum is refused, during appeals and then final refusal. Refugee Action's funding does not permit them to allocate a key worker to a family, who would provide the sort of continuity of advice possible with Social Services support.

Parents do come to Refugee Action about issues they have with schools. These are usually concerned with admissions or with bullying and Refugee Action have run awareness raising session for staff and children in schools around these issues.

Refugee Action told us AASCs have their own problems relevant to career choice when they reach age 16:

- Child benefit stops, and they are not entitled to Educational Maintenance Allowance

- AACSs can be isolated within their own language and culture at home, so less able to improve their English or achieve integration with their peer group.

- Asylum seekers are forbidden to work so children grow up in homes where parents (and grandparents or other relatives) are unemployed (with an additional stress perhaps where the family was well educated and high earning in the past).

- Asylum seeking families may come from cultures with very different career expectations, for example of the role of women. AASCs may

have difficulty in adapting to the host culture, which can create difficulties in relation to decisions about learning or work.

RASAP was funded to work primarily with refugees who receive positive decisions. As with Refugee Action, in relation to children this is often about school admissions and appeals, though it can include wider educational issues. RASAP has a strong tradition of holistic support ,and a commitment to take help through until the need is met, rather than draw a line, say, at the end of the working day. This is exactly the kind of help that refugee and asylum-seeking families need and RASAP was understandably popular with its target group. However, it suffered from short-term (in fact annual) funding, so the service may be cut off, or drastically cut back, at the end of any financial year and in fact this happened at the end of the second year of our project although some of its work continues under the auspices of its parent body, the Race Equality Centre. One resource they have that could help Connexions, as well as schools and colleges, is a well-established list of interpreters, often people from the refugee community who have sought training as far away as London. The RASAP project manager told us they did refer young people to Connexions, but thought that Connexions could do more for AASCs.

Although not funded to help asylum-seekers, RASAP is approached by them so knows about their problems. The RASAP project manager suggested activities that could help AASCs and their families:

- Schools could run workshops for parents of new arrivals at which they explained the significance of parents' evenings and also the role of Connexions. (RASAP could support this with interpreters, but also suggested schools could identify mothers from each language group who did speak sufficient English to interpret, and then work through those mothers to encourage attendance at school events.)

- Schools could provide voluntary work placements for refugee mothers who would like to become teaching assistants (the school can then apply for a training place for them). This would strengthen the home-school link, and enable families, and communities, to understand the English school system better.

The RASAP project manager was not convinced about the need for secrecy in schools about refugee status. She thought this might be more of an anxiety of the teaching staff than of the families or the child concerned.

Schools. Individual teachers are eager to help both AASCs and UASCs but again there are problems for both groups. These include:

- the timetabling problems of supporting special learning needs in school
- the target-driven culture of schools.
- the way they are allocated to schools

The full range of challenges facing young refugees and asylum-seekers in school are well described by Rutter[18]. There are some that are particularly relevant to our concern about making educational decisions. These came to light during our discussion with teachers of English as an Additional Language (EAL) and with Connexions Personal Advisers (PAs).

Firstly, staff may not know which children in secondary school are refugees or asylum-seekers (or the difference between them, or any differences between their situation and that of children of migrant families, a larger group in some schools). There are many reasons why children might want to keep their situation quiet. In some cases only one senior teacher may know, and if the child asks for anonymity that teacher will understandably honour it. This means that no-one may know if an individual could need additional help.

Secondly, new arrivals have to learn English. This means:

- They are likely to spend much of their time out of mainstream school subjects having EAL tuition. As a result they may not make normal progress in those subjects, but also subject- and form-teachers see less of them and cannot get to know them so well

- They advance more slowly in language-based subjects compared, say, with mathematics, art or technical subjects. They may get entered for exams in those subjects because they are likely to get better grades, (schools need to demonstrate good exam results) rather than ones suited to their actual interests and aptitudes.

Thirdly, asylum-seeking children are dispersed between City schools. Several cases were mentioned to us where their journey to school was complicated and lengthy. This was hard on the child but also meant it was

[14] Rutter, Jill (2006) *Refugee Children in the UK*. Maidenhead: Open University Press (second edition)

harder for the family (of AASCs) or the foster carer (of UASCs) to attend parents' evenings and build up a relationship with teachers, an important element of making good educational decisions. Some EAL teachers thought it would be helpful if young refugees and asylum-seekers could be concentrated into a few schools so they could benefit from the increase in expertise on the part of teachers that would follow.

Colleges. Many of the young asylum-seekers were enrolled on courses at FE college and the designated tutor for looked-after children (LAC) at one college who spoke to us knew the UASCs there well. She was involved in Pathway Plans, but said that the other instrument for supporting transition for young people in care, the Personal Education Plan that should move with the child between school and college, rarely reached her. She had good links with the social services team for looked after children, and was in touch with the Connexions PAs for that group and for UASCs, but said it was not always clear which she should contact. A single point of reference with Connexions would help.

Once at college students receive career planning support from a Connexions PA as well as the college's own careers team and higher education specialist adviser, and their tutors. Each curriculum area also has a mentor, in addition to the teaching staff, to support individual students, and in this particular college there was an asylum-seeker and refugee co-ordinator. The college provided an intensive ESOL programme for new arrivals, though the LAC tutor thought the transition to mainstream study programmes could be eased perhaps by preparatory work on specialist vocabulary for technical subjects.

However, the same problem existed at college as at schools for AASCs: there were no systems in place for identifying them and offering support. At enrolment, applicants are invited to 'tick a box' ('Are you an asylum-seeker?') but if they do not there is no way the college can know who might need additional help.

We asked both college and school staff what they thought about the difficulties created by inaccurate age assessments that the young researchers and the young adult group reported to us. While sympathetic to those problems, both pointed out the pressures on their institutions for child protection in respect of the other young people in their care. One school had a story about a 25-year-old who had somehow got himself passed as under 16. A college staff member commented that regrettably the few who abused the rules necessitated a system that erred on the side of caution.

Psychological services. We talked to the director of the clinic for child and adolescent psychiatry in Leicester which received referrals for looked-after children from social workers which includes UASCs. He told us about the difficulties of working through interpreters to help them and also the pressure to discharge earlier than they would wish because of waiting lists and shortage of staff time.

Some UASCs referred to his service had serious psychiatric symptoms, where clinical help was needed urgently. But he also had referrals from social workers of young people who were indeed very worried and had language problems, but were not mentally ill. He stressed the importance for these UASCs of activities with other young people but particularly a strong ongoing relationship with a responsible adult, a plea that had also come from the young researchers. In his opinion the fostering policy needed more thought: the most appropriate foster carers were not necessarily those from the same ethnic community as the youngster.

He described a project which worked with families that involved outreach that had achieved very positive results but said that one of the lessons learned from that was the damage to recipients of such temporary helping schemes. Expectations are raised but the project then comes to an end through lack of funding.

d) IN SUMMARY

Many of the points made by young people, by the young adults and by the helping agencies reinforced each other. If young asylum-seekers are going to be helped to make the best use of their education, either for a future in this country or elsewhere, all agreed on the need for:

- **a more humanitarian approach to age assessments**
- **better continuity of support through the period aged 15 to 18**
- **better inter-agency working**
- **better interpretation services**
- **more support for RCOs**
- **clearer records on numbers**
- **role models, mentors, friends**
- **activities to bring AACS and UASCs together and in contact with young English people.**

These points are explored again under Issues and Recommendations.

6. WHAT NEXT IN LEICESTER?

When the fieldwork had been completed in the autumn of 2008 and the data first collated, a meeting was held at the offices of the Connexions Service to which were invited all the individuals who had contributed, as well as senior staff in the agencies with an interest in the work. The presentation made by the young researchers at this meeting, summarised in section 3 of this report, impressed and moved all present. After the presentations, small groups consisting of young asylum-seekers, staff from the Connexions service, libraries, schools, further education, housing, and mental health services, made some suggestions for activities that could and should happen in Leicester based on what they had heard.

- to make UASCs and AASCs and their families aware of the help and advice available from Connexions: develop a team of young volunteer ambassadors to each refugee nationality group, who would keep community leaders aware of the service and signpost YRASs in the direction of their Connexions Personal Advisor

- to combat loneliness, encourage integration and share information about sources of help: explore a partnership of agencies to develop a Leicester-based centre along the lines of the Dreamers project in Loughborough. Partners could include Libraries and the Youth Service as well as Connexions and Social Services

- to combat loneliness and offer a bridge to mainstream UK life: set up a volunteer-based befriending scheme, where a YRAS (either UASC or AASC) could be matched with a trained befriender who would offer weekly contact. This could be linked with the previous suggestion. Voluntary Action Leicester could be involved in recruiting, training and supporting the befrienders

- to provide the support that all young people need throughout their teenage years: campaign for all UASCs to be allocated to a foster parent, whatever their age, and continue with that parent up to the age of 18 and beyond

- disseminate the project findings more widely, perhaps at a regional event co-presented with other agencies that have received funding from the Paul Hamlyn foundation and others working with young refugees.

7. RECOMMENDATIONS

The overall conclusion from this study is that young asylum-seekers are in urgent need of good, ongoing advice and support on planning their learning in relation to realistic employment ambitions. This does not just apply to unaccompanied asylum-seeking children: it includes those who arrive with their families or carers. Their plans need to take into account the two possible outcomes of their asylum application, and also the possibility that there may be periods of waiting up to a year or more.

Better inter-agency working, based on an understanding of the perspective of the young people themselves, is essential, and better liaison between statutory and voluntary agencies would help all concerned.

There are more specific recommendations to be made at national and local level, and we present these here grouped by the agency to which they are most relevant, but there are implications in most for the work of others.

TO NATIONAL GOVERNMENT

Age assessments. There are enough interruptions already in the brief period between 15 and 18. On humanitarian grounds flexibility in favour of the child is urgently needed.

> **Instead of assuming a young person is not entitled to a service until their age is confirmed, the assumption should be that they are so entitled until proved otherwise.**

Better written information. Handouts at the first Home Office point-of-entry interview, in simple, clear language would help young asylum-seekers.

> **A handout for young asylum-seekers on where to go for help with basic needs, including education and the Connexions service, with local contact addresses.**

TO LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Local Authority awareness of numbers. Monitoring of numbers of AASCs as well as UASCs is essential: without it the Local Authority cannot know if it is meeting its duty of care.

> **Information about asylum and refugee status, and previous education, should be shared with schools and transfer with the child from primary to secondary to further, respecting confidentiality as appropriate.**
>
> **As the Integrated Youth Support Service is rolled out, information about AASCs as well as UASCs in each patch should be available to IYSS staff.**

Interpretation. The telephone Language Line is not easily accessible for the young person themselves, and we were told their interpreters do not have enough specialist or local knowledge.

> **Local training programmes in community interpretation have the potential for increasing inclusion as well as supporting local services such as education and health.**
>
> **Connexions and other agencies could draw on the interpretation skills in the refugee and asylum-seeking community via refugee support agencies such as RASAP in Leicester.**

School admissions policies for young asylum-seekers. Long journeys to school impede home-school links, important for making good educational decisions.

> **Allocation to schools of UASCs and AASCs should take account of travel times and expertise in work with this group in the schools.**

English as an Additional Language. EAL teachers suggested ways in which resources could be shared between schools, but more is needed overall, and would benefit other new arrivals.

> **Resources for EAL teaching in schools should be increased**

Support for Refugee Community Organisations. RCOs cannot provide essential support to UASCs and the families of AASCs without premises. These do not have to be extensive and could be shared.

> **Some RCOs need help in applying and then making best use of all potential sources of grant income.**

Continuity of support. The value of a single champion, mentor, or guardian who will stay with them through to 18 and beyond emerged from current and former UASCs. A local Council for Voluntary Service could help, if ongoing funding for administration, co-ordination and support, could be found.

> **A befriending scheme could address loneliness, discontinuities of support, bewilderment about UK institutions and lack of role models.**

ON INTER-AGENCY WORKING

Inter-agency links. Connexions PAs are able to help with decisions about schooling or training, but not enough agencies know about them. Even where someone in the agency knows it, not all individual staff members are aware.

> **Connexions should proactively seek links with the NASS agency to identify AASCs, as well as the relevant Social Services teams in their locality.**

> **A single well-publicised contact point in Connexions for issues around asylum-seekers and refugees would help other agencies build these links.**

The two smaller RCOs in our project were unaware of the Connexions service. RCOs provide advice in the relevant languages and could interpret for Connexions staff.

> **Better outreach by Connexions to RCOs would give a significant return on effort.**

The Integrated Youth Support Services (IYSS), being introduced at the time of this study, could be a solution to inter-agency working.

Awareness of the issues faced by young refugees and asylum seekers should be part of IYSS staff development.

Home-school links. RASAP suggested schools could:

Run workshops for parents, guardians and foster parents of new arrivals explaining the significance of parents' evenings and the role of Connexions. (RASAP could support this with interpreters)

Identify mothers from each language group who speak sufficient English to interpret. They could encourage friends to attend school events.

Combating loneliness, encouraging integration, developing self-confidence. We visited the Dreamers project in Loughborough where young asylum-seekers and refugees could get together and work out solutions for themselves with support from skilled youth workers.

A partnership of agencies could develop a centre along these lines. Partners could include Libraries, Further Education, Connexions and Social Services as well as the Youth Service

CAREERS ADVICE

Support for Connexions PAs. A group of school-based and other PAs told us they too would like help with face-to-face interpretation. In addition, they wanted:

A colleague with expertise in needs of AASCs as well as UASCs who could advise other PAs and link with external agencies as suggested above

A link to a website that would provide up-to-date, user-friendly information on legal issues and sources of help (national as well as local)

A straightforward protocol on working with young people who may be asylum-seekers.

Voluntary work. We heard of several examples of asylum-seekers helping others whose English was less good, thereby increasing their understanding and confidence and making contacts who could eventually provide references if they get leave to remain. If not, they have experience that may help wherever they go next.

Connexions, Social Services, RCOs and other agencies should encourage young asylum seekers to get involved in community activities.

APPENDIX

Asylum-seeking children aged 18 and under in the City of Leicester (figures for 2007-08)

	Known to Connexions (UASC and AASC)	Known to Social Services (UASC)
Afghanistan	10	18
Albania	1	1
Angola	-	1
Cameroon	2	3
China	1	-
Congo	1	2
Czech Republic	1	-
Iran	2	2
Iraq	2	1
'Iran/Iraq'	2	-
Korea	1	-
Nigeria	-	1
Somalia	4	2
Zimbabwe	1	-
Country unrecorded	26	-
Total	54	31