

Supporting Separated Migrant Children to Thrive During Covid-19

Briefing Paper 3 – Local Authority Surveys

The background

This 3rd briefing paper from the project *Supporting Migrant Children to Thrive during Covid-19* comments on responses to a questionnaire distributed to all 32 Scottish local authorities. We sought to understand whether the practices and views of local authorities with regard to unaccompanied minors identified in a 2018 study (Rigby et al. 2018)¹ had changed as a result of the pandemic.

Local authorities are responsible for the welfare and accommodation of all unaccompanied children through their obligations under the Children (Scotland) Act 1995, UK immigration legislation and, in relation to children at risk of trafficking, the Human Trafficking and Exploitation (Scotland) Act 2015. This latter Act is particularly important in relation to obligations in respect of age assessments (see Scottish Government 2018)². However, across Scotland the ability of local authorities outwith the larger urban areas (especially Glasgow and Edinburgh) to provide appropriate and safe support for UASCs has been questioned, as they have limited experience of supporting separated children (Edinburgh Peace and Justice Centre 2016; Social Work Scotland 2020). Social Work Scotland (2020) has also suggested that poverty in Scotland, and the increase in child protection referrals as a result, has impacted on the ability of local authorities to provide support to separated children, an already marginalised group: the position exacerbated by the pandemic³.

The report by Rigby et al. (2018) found that while local authorities were reporting higher numbers of unaccompanied children becoming looked after and accommodated, there was some inconsistency in relation to practice and guidance consulted. In addition, there was recognition of the additional needs presented by this group of children, and local authorities indicated they drew on the expertise of a number of partner agencies to support both children and young people, not least the Scottish Guardianship Service who have been providing support to separated children since 2010.

The questionnaire

1Rigby P, Fotopoulou, M, Rogers, A, <https://dspace.stir.ac.uk/handle/1893/27945#.YXBFQ1Q2qA>

2 Scottish Government (2018) Age Assessment: Practice Guidance <https://www.gov.scot/publications/age-assessment-practice-guidance-scotland-good-practice-guidance-support-social/>

3Scottish Government (2018) Age Assessment: Practice Guidance <https://www.gov.scot/publications/age-assessment-practice-guidance-scotland-good-practice-guidance-support-social/>

Social Work Scotland (2020) Proposal for Changes to the National Transfer Scheme (NTS) for Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children (UASC) <https://socialworkscotland.org/consultation/proposal-for-changes-to-the-national-transfer-scheme-nts-for-unaccompanied-asylum-seeking-children-uasc/>

A short questionnaire was designed, based on the 2018 study, to capture some of the key issues for local authorities at the start of the pandemic, and to elicit further comments on the issues initially identified in 2018. The questionnaire was distributed by a SurveyMonkey link to all 32 Scottish local authorities via: COSLA (umbrella organisation for Scottish local authorities); the Scottish Government networks in the migration partnership; the Scottish Government Child Trafficking Strategy Group and through pre-established networks of the research team. Seven questionnaires were returned, following repeated attempts at contact via the routes established. It is fair to say that we considered the response rate a little low, although we acknowledge the local authorities were extremely busy as a result of the pandemic. The challenges of engaging local authorities on this issue were discussed in some detail in the 2018 report.

At this point we would like to express our gratitude to those local authorities who completed the questionnaire.

The findings

As only 22% of Scottish local authorities responded to the survey we invite caution in making generalisations from this aspect of the study findings. However, it is worth noting that some of the findings support those from the 2018 study and that the narrative responses mirror what we are finding through other strands of our current research project, of which the survey forms a strand.

A mix of urban and urban/rural local authorities responded to the survey, all in the central area of Scotland. Of note here is that most separated children in Scotland are indeed hosted across the central belt, which could explain why local authorities in other parts of Scotland did not respond. In terms of professional roles held by respondents, all apart from one (a social worker) stated that they were either managers or leaders of teams/services supporting separated children.

Half of the respondents indicated the number of separated children presently being looked after in their areas was in double figures, while most had seen a reduction in the numbers of separated children arriving since the start of the pandemic. This reflects findings from the qualitative interviews conducted in the first stage of the project⁴; it also resonates with global data which highlight a reduction in the numbers of refugee and migrant children- including separated children - arriving in Europe during the first year of the pandemic (UNICEF, 2021)⁵. There are no independent measures of these numbers across Scotland as the Home Office rarely publishes statistics for 'regions'.

All the local authority respondents indicated their biggest source of referrals to services for separated children during the past three years was from Police Scotland. However, the Red

4 <https://separatedinScotland.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Working-Paper-1-Separated-children-and-Connectivity-during-Covid-19.pdf>

5 UNICEF (2021)

Cross, Scottish Refugee Council, the Scottish Guardianship Service, the Home Office, the Vulnerable Resettlement scheme and legal avenues were also reported as referral sources.

Assessments

Compared to the 2018 survey, local authorities indicated a greater range of assessment tools available to evaluate the needs of, and risks for, children and young people, suggesting a developing understanding of the complex and varied issues and systems with which children may be engaged. Covid-19 does not appear to have impacted on the types of assessment undertaken. Assessment of a child's age - when disputed - remains the most common assessment mentioned, despite the requirement, as one local authority indicated, that it should be undertaken '*only if required*'. Interestingly '*age assessments were put on hold for much of the period, whilst other assessments were carried out remotely*' by one local authority - although why this would be the case is not known. All but one of the respondents indicated some additional support was needed in relation to assessment processes for separated children.

Areas of risk and need

The areas of risk and need identified for separated children were, unsurprisingly, uniform across all local authority respondents. All respondents mentioned language; six mentioned accommodation, social isolation, health, and immigration and legal advice. Five of the respondents identified mental health, cultural issues and education.

All respondents suggested these areas had been impacted by the pandemic such that '*access to all of these have reduced or moved online [which has] ... increased isolation for some*'. However, while the '*lack of face-to-face contact has created obvious barriers [it has forced local authorities] to improve digital connectivity in order to carry on providing a service*'. As in other strands of the data collection⁶ the issue of 'connectivity' in various guises is mentioned.

In relation to the specific areas of risk and need, one local authority provided a detailed breakdown of the issues:

The impact on learning English has been significantly impacted due to not being able to access school/college, lack of socialising which have impacted language skills. They all have access to online learning, in which they are engaging, but all young people have expressed struggling with this as they are learning without the support of peers.

Mental health, social isolation is a significant concern due to lockdown restrictions, unable to socialise in the community, lack of health and fitness resources, support groups have been impacted. Places of worship closed, which is excluding young people further from their culture, religion, social groups and coping mechanisms as faith is a significant coping strategy for our young people.

⁶ <https://separatedinScotland.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Working-Paper-1-Separated-children-and-Connectivity-during-Covid-19.pdf>

Delays in relation to [Home Office] substantive interviews being set, delays in decisions being made regarding status, further delays than in usual times. This is causing a great deal of stress for young people especially during a time of a pandemic where all other supports are restrictive.

Health appointments, fewer availability, longer waits e.g., dental health has been a significantly impacted. Mental health supports have either become phone or online consultations, this has impacted some young people's engagement in mental health supports.

Accommodation has been impacted, the housing services have significantly slowed down, less offers, repairs not being completed, young people waiting on housing lists a lot longer etc.

Arriving under Covid-19 restrictions was not considered to have changed the areas of risk and needs substantially, rather Covid-19 exacerbated existing risks. An exception was finding accommodation suitable for isolation purposes to comply with Covid restrictions, while also ensuring children and young people were supported and safe.

All respondents indicated that on arrival all separated children are allocated a social worker, have access to an interpreter and enjoy the same support as any other child in need. Where there were arrivals during the restrictions these services did not change, although the challenges of connectivity and delivering online services were important issues at this point.

Needs of professionals

The majority of respondents (6/7) agreed that professionals who work with separated children need more clarity in understanding the different requirements and stages of the legal processes in relation to children's care as well as immigration. Similarly, 6 out of 7 respondents stated that professionals who work with separated children need more help with understanding the different requirements and stages of the legal processes in relation to education as well as health care.

However, when asked about the need for more clarity in relation to providing accommodation for separated children, findings were mixed. 5 respondents stated somewhat or completely agreed that more clarity and guidance was needed. This issue of accommodation remains a confusing and contested area for local authorities.⁷

An area that appears to still be problematic for professionals is access to national resources and advice, a finding replicating the 2018 study. While all respondents acknowledged challenges working with separated children, only 2/7 indicated they have any 'specialist' support in their local authority areas, although all but one advised they worked with the Scottish Guardianship

⁷ See Ang, J (2015) Legal issues in the accommodation and support of asylum seeking and trafficked children under the Children (Scotland) Act 1995 http://strategiclegalfund.org.uk/Legal%20Services%20Agency_SLF%20Report%20FINAL%20Enc%201.pdf

Service. The need for clearer guidance was highlighted along with the varying level of expertise in working with separated children, or access to resources. However, it was suggested that access to guidance and training could be better organised now that digital connectivity, and access to technology, had been enhanced since Covid-19. Indeed, when asked about the preferred way of communicating information, participants noted online webinars/training events as well as email.

Conclusion

A 22% response rate does not allow for definitive comment on the local authority responses across Scotland but, in the context of the earlier 2018 study, it permits some indicative analysis of recent developments and the challenges remaining – pre and post Covid. Furthermore, as the responses come from local authorities in the central belt, where the majority of separated migrant children are looked after, these responses are important. There does seem to be a developing level of experience in various local authority areas beyond the larger urban conurbations, although the extent of this experience is difficult to assess from this small sample.

Apart from the additional challenges of Covid secure accommodation where children and young people could safely isolate, and the issue of connectivity to services and peers, the types of risk and need noted by local authorities did not change substantively during Covid restrictions. As identified in the 2018 study there remains a need for additional guidance and training for local authority staff – in many respects this should now be easier to deliver as the increased use of online platforms to connect to meetings and training during the restrictions could be extended to link all local authorities into national events.

As Scotland once again prepares to welcome separated children, under the revamped National Transfer Scheme, it is imperative that all local authority areas are familiar with the complex and challenging practice and policy arenas which provide guidance in support for separated children. The pandemic has exacerbated system problems that already existed and increased some of the challenges for children and young people. Respondents to this survey have highlighted some of the positive steps being taken in a number of local authority areas and evidenced an increasing experience and knowledge base; however, it is important that the good emerging practice, and recognition of the challenges and requirement for more support and guidance, is replicated across the country - which may see increased numbers as a result of the scheme - so that appropriate support for separated children is addressed as a matter of urgency. The emergence of Covid 19 and responses to it may provide an opportunity to look again at services for separated children; certainly the emergent findings from the present research project are beginning to illuminate what a 'new normal' may look like.

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