

# Supporting Separated Migrant Children to Thrive During Covid-19

## Briefing Paper 1 – The Beginnings

[Paul Rigby, Fiona Copland, Maria Fotopoulou, Kinga Goodwin, Maggie Grant](#)

This briefing paper is the latest in a research programme of events, workshops, seminars and reports that have, since 2017, examined the experiences of separated and unaccompanied asylum seeking children in Scotland (called here separated children), and professional responses. This series of events has responded to the lived experiences of both vulnerable children and young people and the professionals who work with them. The paper reports on initial findings from an ESRC funded project: *Supporting separated migrant children to thrive during Covid-19*.

In Scotland, local authorities and partner agencies have been developing their practices in working with separated children since the turn of the century, building on many years of experience of working with vulnerable children. In the last 5–10 years media coverage of, and policy responses for, unaccompanied asylum seeking children in Calais, and other children on the move across Europe, has further highlighted the potential vulnerability of separated children and the challenges they face on their journeys and on arrival in the UK. The Scottish Government has supported practice through: a policy focus on refugees and asylum seekers; funding the Scottish Guardianship Service; and establishing links through the strategic migration partnership with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities (Cosla). Nevertheless, practice development and understanding in Scotland is often hampered by the challenges in identifying the numbers of separated children, as figures for ‘regions’ are not routinely published by the Home Office. Our research in this area in Scotland has also encountered challenges: engaging with local authorities has not always been easy as they grapple with complex political and practice issues, as well as a media spotlight, in respect of work with separated children and migrant populations in general.

The last 12 months has also seen the emergence of a global pandemic that has impacted everybody. Separated children, and those professionals who work with them, are not excluded from this impact. Prior to COVID-19, other studies by members of our University of Stirling research team [identified](#) that social, education and legal provision is most likely to meet the complex needs of separated children when it involves inter-professional support, peer interaction and familiarity with immigration and welfare processes. The COVID-19 pandemic impacts on this cross-service provision with potentially serious consequences in terms of integration, well-being, and the ability of children and young people to thrive, socially and educationally.

The present project aims to:

- Explore how separated children manage the COVID-19 crisis and how it impacts on their connectivity to networks (peers and services).
- Examine the ways professionals have adapted practices to mitigate the impact of restrictions on service provision, network connectivity, and to identify best practice within this.
- Deliver and evaluate an on-line intervention for young people to produce language-based artefacts on their experiences of crisis, including COVID-19, in order to support their educational goals.
- Disseminate best practice for service providers working with separated children in times of crisis.

The interdisciplinary research team working on the project has developed a multi-methods approach, drawing on the lived experiences of young people and professionals. Through interviews with young people and practitioners, in addition to arts based interventions and support, it aims to identify the specific challenges young people and services face during the pandemic, identify some of the good practice that has emerged and consequently inform longer term interventions to combat challenges. It is hoped the findings will benefit separated children and young people and inform service delivery, while also supporting services to develop strategies to deal with current and future challenges.

## Emerging Themes

From the interviews it has become apparent that both young people and professionals have been acutely aware of the challenges faced by everybody during a global pandemic. Interviewees reported the almost complete cessation of some services at the outset of lockdown as agencies pulled back substantially amidst the uncertainty and moved their work online. From the interview data, **connectivity** has also emerged as a key area of concern as online working has:

- Reduced, in many cases, the number of hours of face-to-face education offered to separated children, affecting their English language development in particular.
- Revealed that access to IT resources are not equal amongst the group, with some trying to follow online lessons on their phones.
- Impacted on relationship building amongst separated children and between separated children and their communities.
- Severely affected professionals' ability to establish trusting relationships with children, despite some indications of increased online contact time.
- Identified connectivity issues between professional services
- Highlighted the importance of human contact and companionship in response to separated children's emotional needs.

In addition, the interviews have suggested that professionals feel that their ability to provide what they consider to be an effective service to separated children has been adversely impacted by the pandemic, with one ESOL tutor, for example, suggesting that the group was 'worse off' than it was before.

Interviews have also revealed that as the pandemic has progressed, and additional national restrictions have been put in place, services and young people have adapted reasonably quickly to the changes. There have been a number of examples of good innovative practice in relation to online contact with some services adapting particularly well in ensuring young people feel supported during this time (e.g. provision of IT equipment and online meetings). In some instances the more rural areas were able to respond more speedily at the outset because of the systems already in place for contact.

The challenges highlighted by support services have developed our initial thinking: for separated children and young people Covid-19 may in some respects be just another crisis amongst many they have faced on their journeys, while for professional support services, Covid-19 has been a unique and unprecedented challenge to established norms of working. This is not to downplay what is a serious and global issue that has clearly impacted on many people across the globe, but to consider its impact in the context of already complex circumstances. This is theme that we hope to be able to expand on as more data becomes available.

## **Next Steps**

At the time of writing this initial briefing paper we have started to implement stage 2 of the project, an arts based intervention. Twelve young people have enthusiastically joined a global group of talented artists and English language teaching professionals to develop creative projects around the theme of Covid-19. The initial results of the arts projects will be the subject of a future briefing paper. There is also a more detailed, research focused Working Paper soon to be published on the website on the initial findings, exploring the concept and practice of connectivity.

To stay connected with the study and findings as these are published follow us on Twitter or Facebook.