

# Separated Children in the UK – Reflections from Professionals

## Introduction

In this 3rd working paper from the Separated in Scotland project, ‘Supporting separated migrant children to thrive during Covid 19’, funded by ESRC under its ‘responses to Covid’ call, we will be looking at some of the similarities and difference between Scotland and the rest of the UK in relation to the impact of the pandemic on services for separated children. We will be drawing on data from two focus groups and one interview with a total of nine professionals working in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. Participants comprised seven social work professionals working in a range of roles (including one police adviser and two Independent Reviewing Officers), one foster carer and one senior adviser with a third sector organisation. All had experience of working to support separated children during the pandemic. Participants were working in a wide variety of locations, from large urban areas with relatively high numbers of separated children to more rural areas with very small numbers of separated children.

While the project focused mainly on practice in Scotland, the reserved nature of immigration policy to Westminster highlights the importance of comparative discussion involving all four nations (Home Office, 2021). This is particularly relevant now as changes to the National Transfer Scheme see the increased movement of separated children around the UK, to jurisdictions with differing social care policy and legislation, including in relation to child protection. These emergent findings will reflect on some of the specific issues for provision of social services and support, but also, as the project draws to a close, we will focus on some of the ongoing concerns about policy and practice responses for separated children and young people.

## Context

The wider geo-political climate in relation to work with separated children is never far removed from day-to-day practice. While the impetus for the present research project was

the Covid 19 pandemic, the war in Ukraine – and the movement of millions of people across the borders of Europe – raises the possibility of a growth in refugees and asylum seekers to the UK. Although there is no clear evidence at the time of writing that the Ukrainian conflict will lead to increased numbers of separated children arriving in the UK, the potential has been highlighted in the media (Fallon 2022). As Chase and Allsop (2021: 210) have stated *“we live in a world in which lives can become unsustainable overnight as a result of persecution, conflict, war, famine, drought or a whole range of other economic, social and political factors...”*. While the findings from our study are focused on the pandemic, the systemic and response challenges across the UK are no less likely to apply to any child, whenever they arrive, for whatever reason. For these reasons we have focused on issues in this paper that are not just Covid related, although they may have been exacerbated by the pandemic.

### **Access to technology and wi-fi – connectivity**

Emerging findings from the interviews in Scotland identified the differential access to technology and ability to connect online. Interestingly, there were some suggestions that for some of the more rural areas this was easier as service providers already had to find innovative ways of engaging with children and young people generally because of the distances involved. The indications from participants in the rest of the UK, although based on a limited sample, suggest that urban areas adapted better to the full shift online: As one focus group participant, working in a third sector organisation in England across a large area including both urban and rural locations, noted:

*Likewise between urban and rural area, generally they responded better in the urban areas, just because maybe they have more experience and things like that. There were some benefits.....there were certain youth groups available in London that went online, and that meant people from all over the country could attend those who wouldn't normally get that opportunity.*

One of the reasons for this more rapid adaptability in the urban areas was *“[...] just because they are more experienced [working with separated children]”*, although it was also suggested

that the actual *“isolation issues you have in rural areas were just made ten times worse by COVID, whereas at least in the cities, maybe they were a bit [...] There still was a bit more they could do”*. Our findings chime with other recent research suggests greater exploration of the impact of moving online, particularly in rural areas, is required (Trancă 2022).

In this respect access to technology and connectivity was clearly an issue across the UK and one to which services took time to adapt. The usual platforms re access and contact were mentioned:

*..... so generally a lot of our visits were done virtually via either Teams or young people often preferred using WhatsApp on their phones because they're so used to communicating that way anyway, so it was difficult to begin with. I felt that, after a month or two, it started to work quite well. In fact, for some young people, we had better kind of communication via WhatsApp than we did when we had face-to-face contact because I think it's something that they're really comfortable with using. .... but overall I think, in terms of actually having the meetings and the visits, that was resolved quite well, I think, within [rural area].* (Social work professional, England),  
focus group

Moving forward, participants acknowledged that some meetings may still be carried out online (beyond the end of pandemic restrictions). Potential benefits, such as access to a wider pool of interpreters, were raised alongside a range of concerns about the impact on professionals' ability to build relationships with children and young people. How this may impact on child protection and safeguarding is largely unknown, although findings from a longitudinal nationwide study report mixed outcomes for the move to cyber meetings (Ferguson, Kelly and Pink, 2021).

In the same way as participants in Scotland, focus group participants working in England, Northern Ireland and Wales reflected on concerns about the wider impact of the pandemic on young people's experiences of education, support and friendships, including the potential for stark levels of social isolation. One participant recalled:

*For some of our young people, just the sheer isolation led to low mood, low engagement in general. ... a lot of them live in supported accommodation that isn't staffed, and suddenly key workers were not necessarily visiting the home. I had one of my young people when we did start visiting again say, 'Can I have a hug, because nobody has touched me for six months' (Social work professional, England, focus group)*

With respect to separated children the impact of further and continued transitioning to online work with children with varying levels of English and varying degrees of familiarity with UK culture and systems may be different. Certainly, it was felt by some participants that some agencies did not really take account of the particular challenges for children and young people newly arrived in the UK. These perspectives reflect wider concerns about the pandemic exacerbating the digital divide and creating a *'hidden form of social inequality'* (Beaunoyer et al, 2020).

## **National Transfer Scheme and Experience**

Following the provisions of the 2016 Immigration Act to permit the transfer of unaccompanied children, the Scottish Government, Convention of Scottish Local Authorities (COSLA), and local authorities entered into negotiations with the Home Office to facilitate the arrival of children and young people to local authorities in Scotland. More recent policy manoeuvres have 'progressed' towards mandatory movement, a change that has brought criticism from the Scottish Government (Scottish Government 2021), amongst others.

Respondents to [a survey of local authorities](#) conducted as part of this project (Rigby et al 2021) have highlighted some of the positive steps being taken in a number of local authority areas to prepare for the arrival of separated children and evidenced an increasing experience and knowledge base across Scotland. Variability in experience and knowledge between local authority areas was also evident in the UK wide interviews, with substantial difference noted even among the small numbers attending focus groups. In areas that had little experience of working with separated children, participants were often working with only one or two

children at a time, and expressed concerns about the impact on the support available in those areas:

*“The expertise isn't there, the knowledge isn't there and I would say every time we have a young person come through, it's almost like we go through the same relearning loop as to what we need to do to accommodate that young person, to provide them with support, to provide them with interpreters, etc.”* (Social work professional, Wales)

Similarly, it was noted that with the new National Transfer Scheme, there will be even more local authority areas which lack experience and expertise starting to work with a small number of separated children.

## **Hotels**

A concerning feature of the UK wide focus group discussions was the use of hotels by the Home Office to accommodate newly arrived migrants, including children and young people. While the extent of this is not clear, participants reported a sudden and notable increase in some areas, and there have been concerns raised about this practice in relation to the support and services children experience (Preston 2021). It was suggested that the use of hotels has increased since the pandemic:

*Yes, it's related. I mean, the transfer stuff, I think a lot of that is related because a lot more people are arriving concentrated in one place... The thing with the hotels is exacerbated, I would say, by COVID.* (Third sector professional, England)

The same participant went on to note:

*“The way young people arrive in that area at the moment, it's mixture of people being transferred from Kent and Dover; people just arriving spontaneously, and then also the Home Office are sending a lot of people into hotels who are theoretically adults, but*

*often a lot of them end up getting age assessed subsequently and taken into care. That's happened a lot."*

While there was some consensus of the impact of Covid and the use of hotels it is not definitively clear from the focus groups if this practice was related specifically to Covid. Participants suggested other factors, including changes to housing providers contracted by the Home Office, which predated the pandemic. The use of hotels to accommodate children has not been an issue that has been identified to date in Scotland, although it is known that hotels are being used for accommodating adult asylum seekers (Armstrong et al, 2020).

## **Conclusion**

At the time of writing, the majority of pandemic restrictions have been lifted, although rates of Covid 19 remain relatively high. Going forward, it will be important to track services for separated migrant children particularly with regard to online provision of services and their effect on young people's well-being. It will also be important to investigate how changes to the National Transfer Scheme play out and if there are consequences for young people of the intersection of the National Transfer Scheme with practices resulting from the pandemic. The hope is that the learning that has taken place over the last months will inform support for separated migrant children, even if they are dispersed to areas with scant experience of working with this vulnerable group. However, this remains to be seen.

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