



**YOUTH ACCESS**

**Championing Youth Advice and Counselling**

# Equity scoping

Addressing inequity in service provision for

**Refugee and asylum-seeking  
young people**

February 2024

# About Youth Access

Youth Access exists to ensure that every young person has access to the support they need, when and where they need it, to thrive on their journey into adulthood.

Alongside our member network of 128 youth advice and counselling services, we champion young people's right to access high-quality services providing a range of support, from mental health and wellbeing to housing and employment, all under one roof, in their local community.



# Introduction

All young people deserve access to support that respects their rights and meets their needs. Yet, too often, the very systems created to support young people perpetuate inequality and reproduce systems of oppression. Put simply, many young people remain under-heard and under-served, facing barriers to services often not designed for or reflective of them.

Addressing entrenched inequalities in service access and experience is complex, requiring a sophisticated understanding of the needs, cultures and help-seeking behaviours within each specific group as well as the reasons for the shortcomings within services.

This is one of five accompanying briefings covering the key findings from our equity scoping review, which focus on addressing inequity in service provision for the following young people:

- **Black young people and young people from racialised communities**
- **Gypsy, Roma and Traveller young people**
- **Refugee and asylum-seeking young people**
- **Trans and gender-diverse young people**
- **Deaf young people**

Whilst young people with shared identities or with shared experiences often have a distinct pattern of needs that must be understood in depth by any service attempting to address their marginalisation, our broader mapping also identified some common factors useful to consider in developing an appropriate approach. These findings are featured in our [overview report](#).

*About*

# Refugee and asylum seeking young people

The terms 'refugee', 'asylum seeker' and 'migrant' are used to describe people who are on the move, have left their countries and have crossed borders.

- A refugee is a person who has fled their own country because they are at risk of serious human rights violations and persecution there.
- The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees defines an asylum seeker as a person who has fled their country and is seeking protection from persecution and serious human rights violations in another country, but who hasn't yet been legally recognised as a refugee and is waiting to receive a decision on their asylum claim. Not every asylum seeker will ultimately be recognised as a refugee, but every refugee was initially an asylum seeker.
- There is no internationally accepted legal definition of a migrant. Migrants are people staying outside their country of origin, who are not asylum seekers or refugees. Some migrants leave their country because they want to work, study or join family, for example.

Others feel they must leave because of poverty, political unrest, natural disasters or other serious circumstances that exist there. Many migrants do not fit the legal definition of a refugee, but could nevertheless be in danger if they went home.

It is worth noting that some young people may not wish to be defined by their legal status, so may not use the terms above to describe themselves. The term 'newly arrived' has been cited as a preferable term by some young people.<sup>5</sup>

In 2022, the UK received applications for asylum for 89,398 people (including dependants) (House of Commons Library, 2023). In 2021, just over half of refugees to the UK (52%) were aged 18-29, with the majority of these being young men (Home Office, 2022). In the year ending September 2022, the UK received 5,152 applications for asylum from unaccompanied children (Refugee Council website).

In 2021, the top five most common countries of nationality of people who applied for asylum in the UK were: Iran, Iraq, Eritrea, Albania and Syria. This pattern shifted in 2022, with the largest nationality groups being Asian countries (31% of applicants) and European countries (24% of applicants), including Ukraine (House of Commons Library, 2023).

There are geographical concentrations of separated children near to international airports, ports and Asylum Screening Units. However, dispersal policies increasingly mean young refugees and asylum seekers are being relocated into areas where there may not be specialist services.

# Service needs

Some young people are forced to flee their country of origin on account of a fear of persecution, such as forced marriage, child labour, or conscription into the armed forces. Some flee because of the persecution of a family member, or to escape war and conflict, human rights abuses, or severe social deprivation. Their experiences, journeys and precarious status give rise to severe levels of need for support and services, and leave them vulnerable to exploitation.

## **Poverty, destitution and isolation**

- Young refugees and asylum seekers can experience destitution and financial hardship across all stages of their asylum claim. Destitution can result from delays in receiving asylum support; inadequate financial support available; and being repeatedly moved within asylum accommodation (Destitute Asylum Seeker Service, 2021).
- Separation from the security of family and home, and loss of community and culture, can be exacerbated by difficulties establishing and maintaining social connections and support networks in the UK.



## Navigating systems

- The UK asylum and immigration system can be confusing and challenging to navigate. Young refugees and asylum seekers might not be aware of, or know how to access, support systems to help them during this process.
- These difficulties are often compounded by challenges with language, and a lack of understanding of the legal process and their rights as migrants.

## Legal needs

- Young refugees and asylum seekers almost invariably have complex legal needs, commonly related to:

- **The immigration and asylum process**
- **Age assessments**
- **Welfare entitlement**
- **Local authority support – e.g. as a looked-after child or care leaver**
- **Access to education**
- **Housing**
- **Service transition at 18**

- The stress and uncertainty related to these problems tends to negatively impact on young people's mental health, and the outcome of a young person's asylum application is highly significant for their future well-being.
- It is extremely important that young people are supported and represented throughout the asylum process and beyond by good quality, young person-friendly lawyers.



## Mental health and trauma

- Asylum seekers are five times more likely to have mental health needs than the general population, and more than 61% will experience severe mental distress (Mental Health Foundation).
- Many young refugees and asylum seekers have suffered traumatic experiences, such as witnessing the death, abduction or torture of parents or other relatives; or being the victim of torture, violence, abuse or trafficking. They may have overwhelming feelings of loss, separation or survivor's guilt.
- Children seeking asylum experience a range of mental health difficulties, including post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, self-harm, and behaviour problems (Flood & Coyne, 2019).
- Trafficked children and young people are often very fearful, e.g. due to threats having been made towards them or their families, or large debts supposedly owed to the traffickers. They are also often subjected to physical, psychological or sexual abuse or neglect (NSPCC).

**“Asylum seekers are five times more likely to have mental health needs than the general population”**

(Mental Health Foundation)



## Discrimination

- Young refugees and asylum seekers often face discrimination, hate attacks, and hostility.
- This is exacerbated by the current hostile environment which exists for people from asylum seeking backgrounds.
- Some young refugees and asylum seekers are fleeing persecution based on their LGBTQ+ identity.



# Barriers to access to services

Young refugees and asylum seekers come up against a great many barriers to accessing the services and support they need.

- Lack of status is a major obstacle to accessing basic social rights and entitlements. During the period in which a young person has an insecure legal status, many face difficulties accessing services.
- When young refugees and asylum seekers lack official documentation, this leads to problems confirming their age and identity, can lead to them being excluded from services and delays access to support.
- In navigating a confusing system that is unfamiliar to them, many young people are unaware of their rights and entitlements, the services that are available, or how to access them.
- There is also a poor understanding amongst professionals of young refugees' and asylum seekers' rights, e.g. some social workers assume that any foreign young person will have no recourse to public funds.
- Young refugees and asylum seekers may be isolated from support structures which are necessary to navigate and negotiate services.
- Many young refugees and asylum seekers have limited English and experience language barriers when accessing services.
- Young people often need interpreters, but interpreters are scarce and, since the pandemic, often prefer to work remotely.

- Services may not have dedicated budget to cover interpreting costs.
- In many parts of the UK, there is a lack of specialist services with knowledge and experience in working with young refugees and asylum seekers. Young people can easily disengage with services if they feel no-one is listening to them or understanding the difficulties they face.
- Cuts to legal aid have resulted in shortages of high quality immigration and social welfare lawyers with relevant expertise.
- Young refugees and asylum seekers' mental health needs may be assessed as being below the threshold for statutory mental health services, and NHS waiting lists remain long.
- Local authority gatekeeping can lead to housing, welfare and care being unlawfully denied.
- Some young migrants report experiences of discrimination by service providers.
- The costs of legal fees (notably for immigration lawyers), travel and phone data can prevent young people accessing services.
- Young refugees and asylum seekers are more likely to be digitally excluded from services (Youth Legal, 2023). At the same time, the pandemic has led to more young refugees sticking with remote access to services and being unsure about stepping into a service in person.

**Many young refugees and asylum seekers are too traumatised for counselling when they arrive in the UK, or may not be in a safe and stable place to discuss their mental health until their status, accommodation and income are all in place.**

**Young people's trauma may manifest in physical symptoms, but recognition of the connection between physical and mental health is not well recognised in some cultures.**

- Mental health is an unknown concept to some young refugees and asylum seekers. There may be stigma in their culture or community about counselling, or an unfamiliarity with the concepts behind Western therapeutic models.
- There may also be community stigma regarding sexually transmitted infections and premarital sex, creating barriers to sexual health services (Maheen et al, 2021). Similarly, there may be stigma around LGBTQ+ issues.

# Methods of improving access and service quality

The evidence review and interviews with managers and practitioners in frontline organisations generated a large number of ideas for how to improve access to information, advice, counselling and support and the quality of services for young refugees, asylum seekers and migrants.

# Develop a network of community groups and interpreters

- Building trust with relevant migrant communities is essential. Services should develop links and referral partnerships with community groups working with young refugees and asylum seekers.
- Where possible, it is often best to deliver outreach, e.g. by putting staff, such as mental health workers, into community groups, schools and colleges in areas with high concentrations of refugees, or where there is an International 6th form, rather than expecting young people to come to a YIACS centre.
- A strong network of reliable interpreters should be developed to ensure that services can communicate effectively with young people who have limited English language skills.

# Develop expertise in your team

- For some clients who are refugees or asylum seekers, finding a service that understands the needs of migrants in their situation can be more important than finding a service that is young person-centred.
- It is important that services develop the knowledge of the whole staff team around the traumatic experiences often held by young people; the asylum system; the framework for entitlements for young refugees and asylum seekers; and the landscape of service provision for this client group. Up to date information and training in this area can help tackle misconceptions and mistakes that leave children and young people unsupported.
- Training in trauma-informed practices is essential for staff delivering interventions.

## Employ specialist staff

- Where possible, services should consider recruiting staff with specialist skills in working with young refugees and asylum seekers.
- There are pros and cons to employing staff from refugee communities. Whilst young people need practitioners they can trust, staff from their own community can act as a barrier to access. Young people may have confidentiality concerns about personal information they disclose getting back to their family or community, particularly where stigma is an issue. It is also important to bear in mind that there are splits in many refugee communities, with both sides of a conflict sometimes living close to each other. Young people may therefore be more willing to confide problems regarding mental health, drugs, alcohol, sexual health or criminalisation to someone with no connection to their community.
- Services should ensure there are adequate support systems in place for staff working with trauma every day.

## Provide a range of interventions

- **Access to legal advice** - Addressing many young people's problems and needs may ultimately rely on them securing good-quality, free legal advice and representation from solicitors and immigration advisors. Services should have good referral links to specialist services, such as Coram Children's Legal Centre, Youth Legal, Just for Kids Law and Migrant Children's Legal Unit, so that they can facilitate access to young person-friendly legal advice.

- **Advocacy to navigate the system** - Many young people will also need a single, constant individual, who can work across asylum and welfare domains, is independent of other agencies and service providers, and can act as an advocate with or link between all services and professionals that are involved. Such staff need to have a sufficient level of knowledge and understanding to help young people access their rights and entitlements.
- **Managing trauma** – Services should be prepared to conduct a lot of grounding and stabilisation work and mental health education with individuals who are still in a place of trauma before offering counselling or other therapies. This is particularly necessary where young people still have legal issues or unstable living situations, i.e. the first step may be to manage the trauma rather than address it.
- **Specialist therapeutic support** – ideally offering young people the option of one-to-one counselling or therapeutic support in group settings.
- **Life skills** – many young people will need help to learn life skills, such as cooking, using public transport and understanding how to budget and manage their (usually very limited) money.
- **Social support** – support groups and projects that bring young refugees and asylum seekers together to make friends, get support from others going through experiences they can relate to, develop social skills and build self-confidence.
- **Youth voice projects** – giving young refugees and asylum seekers opportunities to speak out on issues that affect them can empower young people and help to reduce marginalisation.



## Offer flexibility in communication methods

- Whilst many young refugees and asylum seekers may prefer to build trust and get help face to face, others may prefer to get support through remote methods. In order to tailor delivery to individuals' needs, services should spend time with clients to discuss their preferences, agree ongoing methods of contact, and review this regularly. Services should consider using Whatsapp to receive contact from young people and communicate with interpreters.
- Greater flexibility than is normally applied may be needed around how long services can work with individuals and in continuing to support young people despite non-attendance at appointments.

# Key sources & further reading

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- Young Minds - Supporting refugee and asylum seeking children <https://www.youngminds.org.uk/professional/resources/supporting-refugee-and-asylum-seeking-children/>
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