



Refugee Council

Something to smile about

Promoting and supporting the educational and recreational needs of refugee children

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February 2011



Acknowledgements

Thanks are due to the SMILE project team, Arnaud Vervoitte, Project Manager, and the Volunteer Coordinators: Matthew Court, Sarah Hislam and Iona Lyons for their invaluable contribution to the research and whose commitment and enthusiasm for the project was evident throughout. Particular thanks are due to the Research Manager, Lisa Doyle, who designed and implemented much of the research and provided support and guidance for the research project, as well as to Abdullahi Hussein who conducted and designed some of the initial research. Special thanks also to Jane Dykins, Head of Children's Section, who provided overall guidance for the SMILE project, as well as Judith Dennis, Policy Adviser-Unaccompanied Children, and James Lee, Employment and Training Policy Adviser, for sharing their knowledge and expertise.

Thanks must also go to the Department for Education (DfE) for funding the SMILE project and related research.

Finally, this report could not have been written without the input from the volunteers and young people involved in the SMILE project who so kindly shared their time and experiences.

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1. Introduction

The Supporting and Mentoring in Learning and Education (SMILE) project was a three-year project set up by the Refugee Council in 2008. The project was funded by the Department for Education (DfE) (formerly Department for Children Schools and Families (DCSF)) and operated across three regions: Greater London, the West Midlands, and Yorkshire and Humberside. It supported children who are seeking asylum or are refugees (both separated and in families) to improve their life chances by helping them to enjoy and achieve in education, and by raising awareness of their specific needs. SMILE aimed to reduce the isolation and address the absence of education and social activities experienced by so many refugee children and young people. The project worked to promote inclusive education by challenging prejudices relating to asylum and raise awareness of the needs of refugee children.¹ A key part of SMILE was to provide one to one support to the children and young people through assigning them a mentor or befriender to provide individual, tailored support. Whilst there is some overlap between the roles of mentor and befriender, SMILE differentiated as follows:

- **Mentoring:** volunteers enable children and young people to identify and access education placements and support them during the settling period for a period of 3 months, which may be extended to up to 6 months where needed, to ensure the young person is placed in education and adequately settled
- **Befriending:** volunteers support and encourage children and young people in their education and leisure activities for a period of approximately 12 months.

In addition, the SMILE project also aimed to raise awareness around the needs of refugee children through conducting school talks and interactive work in schools, as well as training for teachers and staff promoting the needs of this client group.

Finally, action research was embedded in the project in order to monitor and evaluate the project, provide a continuous feedback mechanism between researcher and project workers to ensure best practice, and to identify wider barriers and solutions to enable children who are seeking asylum or are refugees to enjoy and achieve in their education.

For more information about the work of the SMILE Project, please visit www.refugeecouncil.org.uk

1.1 Definitions

In the UK, a person is officially a **refugee** when they have their claim for asylum accepted by the government or by the Judicial system thereafter.

An **asylum seeker** is a person who has left their country of origin and formally applied for asylum in another country but whose application has not yet been determined.

Separated children are children under 18 years of age who are outside their country of origin and separated from both parents or their legal/customary primary care-giver.² In the UK, separated children who have claimed asylum are often referred to as unaccompanied asylum seeking children (UASC) or

¹ For the purposes of the report, the term 'refugee children' will be used to refer to both those with status and those still in the asylum process, save where necessary to differentiate..

² This definition is taken from the Separated Children in Europe Programme (SCEP), which uses the word 'separated' rather than 'unaccompanied' because it more accurately defines the essential problem that such children face. Namely, that they lack the care and protection of their parents or primary caregiver and as a consequence suffer socially and psychologically from this separation (SCEP, 2010:4).



unaccompanied minors. The majority of separated children come to the UK on their own. For the purposes of the SMILE Project, the term ‘children in families’ refers to those children who are accompanied by a parent.

Age disputed children are those whose stated age as a child is in dispute by the Home Office or a local authority and they are therefore treated as an adult. In some cases, this results in a young person being held in immigration detention.

Looked after children are children in the care of a local authority. Children can become ‘looked after’ as a result of there being no person with parental responsibility for them; the child being lost or abandoned; or the person who has been caring for him/her being prevented from providing him/her with suitable accommodation or care.³ They may be looked after in a children’s home, by foster carers, or other family members. All separated asylum seeking children should also be considered looked after children.⁴

1.2 Context

Data on numbers of children who are seeking asylum or are refugees in the UK is somewhat limited. However, according to Home Office annual statistics, in 2009 an estimated 3,175 separated children applied for asylum in the UK. The main countries of origin for separated children are currently Afghanistan, Iran, China, Iraq and Eritrea, with the overwhelming majority being from Afghanistan. Indeed, the number of Afghan unaccompanied children seeking asylum has continued to grow steadily such that in 2009 Afghan children represented more than 50 per cent of all separated asylum-seeking children in the UK (UNHCR Policy Development Evaluation Service [PDES], 2010).

The annual statistics also include figures relating to the number of children in families seeking asylum. In 2009, there were a total of 4,391 asylum applicant dependants aged 18 and under (Home Office, 2010). In addition, a further 1,130 age disputed separated children applied for asylum in the same year.⁵

1.2.1 Experiences of education

Refugee young people’s experiences of education will vary widely, depending on their socio-economic

³ The term was introduced by the Children Act 1989.

⁴ Local Authority Circular (2003) 13 established that separated asylum seeking children should be considered ‘looked after children’. For further information, see http://www.dh.gov.uk/en/Publicationsandstatistics/Lettersandcirculars/Localauthoritysocialservicesletters/DH_4003946

⁵ These figures relate to applicants whose age was disputed at the time of application. The data is therefore provisional, as it does not show the outcome of any challenge made by the applicant to the age dispute.

status, religion, gender and pre-flight experiences. Some will have obtained high levels of quality education in their home country, whilst others may have little or no experience due to their home environment, disruption of services from war and conflict or long journeys to a place of refuge. Whatever their experiences, research highlights how, once in the UK, education is a high priority for most refugee children (for example, Save the Children, 2001; Brownlees and Finch, 2010). For refugee and asylum-seeking young people, school can also provide stability and normality which can mitigate the negative effects of traumatic experiences and support them to overcome isolation and build resilience (Refugee Council, 2005; Brownlees and Finch, 2010):

It is no exaggeration to say that refugee children's well-being depends to a major degree on their school experiences, successes and failures. . . . School policies are a powerful tool for helping a refugee child feel safe and normal again, and begin to learn. They can promote the child's confidence and integration, and prevent isolation and frustration. Failure in school can have a disastrous impact on children who are trying to reconstruct their lives and their self esteem, and develop hope for the future. Educational progress and emotional well-being are mutually dependent. (Richman, 1998a as cited in Hek, 2005:29).

However, literature relating to children who are seeking asylum or are refugees in the UK continues to suggest that they face considerable educational problems, particularly in terms of accessing education (Jones & Rutter, 1998; Save the Children, 2000, 2001; Dennis, 2002; Refugee Council, 2005; Doyle & McCorriston, 2008; Brownlees and Finch, 2010). Indeed, little seems to have changed in this respect over the past decade. Factors such as lack of availability of school or college places, particular issues with Year 11 and schools reluctance to take on pupils in the middle of the term are still affecting refugee children's access to education today (Brownlees and Finch, 2010). Research also suggests that children seeking asylum continue to be treated as asylum seekers first and as children second (Pinson and Arnot, 2010:252).

Educational under-achievement among children who are seeking asylum or are refugees may also be an issue and has been attributed to, among other things, a lack of language proficiency, bullying and racism, and experiences of trauma and flight (Rutter, 2003a, 2003b; DfES, 2006; Archer, & Francis, 2007; Demie et al, 2008). Young refugees who arrive with their families also face difficulties, as family members may struggle to negotiate new systems, as well as the language barrier. For those children, the extent to which they can successfully adapt to their new school is very much dependent on the extent to which their family manages to adapt to the new situation (Anderson et al 2004, cited in Hart, 2009:360). A recent UNICEF report examining support for separated refugee children in the UK found that success in education is rarely dependent on previous educational experience, but rather depends on individual ambition and the support the children receive in helping them to engage with the system (Brownlees and Finch, 2010:95).

1.2.2 Age dispute

There is currently no statutory procedure for local authorities to follow when conducting an assessment of age of a person claiming to be child. Rather the current approach for undertaking age assessments has evolved through practice by social service departments and a growing number of legal challenges to the process. Practice guidelines have emerged which provide a pro-forma on which to base the assessment interview for a young asylum seeker claiming to be under the age of 18. These guidelines were approved by Burnton, J. in the High Court in July 2003 and have become known as the 'Merton judgement'. Local authority age assessments are required to be Merton-compliant and to follow subsequent legal judgements (Crawley, 2007).

Research shows that the Merton judgment has had both positive and negative implications for the process of age assessment (Crawley, 2007). The majority are positive however there is evidence that the judgment,

particularly the wording of paragraph 37, has encouraged some local authorities to focus disproportionately on the credibility of an asylum seeker's account.⁶ Research also evidences considerable variation in the quality of the assessment process undertaken by local authorities, whilst some good practice exists, the quality can also be poor (Hek, 2005; Crawley, 2007). Young people may not necessarily be assessed as adults, but could be assessed at an age higher than the age they state to be but still under 18. Age dispute is a particularly important issue for young people as being age disputed as an adult can affect a young person's whole identity, the way their asylum claim is dealt with and their ability to access support and services as well as their emotional wellbeing (Crawley, 2007; Brownlees and Finch, 2010). What is clear then, is that refugee young people's wellbeing is affected not only by their pre-flight experiences, but also their experiences upon arrival in the country of sanctuary. Indeed, evidence suggests that post-exile experiences are equally as important in determining mental wellbeing (Hek, 2005; Porter and Haslam, 2005; Hart, 2009). Common experiences that young refugees can face on arrival in the UK include poor living conditions, unexpected relocations, family members with mental health problems, bullying and feeling unsafe at school (Hart, 2009:354). Increasing the resilience of refugee children can be augmented by mechanisms such as ensuring a caring adult is available, programmes to develop self esteem, social skills and teaching host language (Anderson 2004, cited in Hart, 2009:365).

1.2.3 Policy background

By law, separated children in England have the same rights and entitlements as citizen children in relation to education and support from local authorities. However, access to care and support is often determined by a child's immigration status (Children's Legal Centre, 2009:3). Separated children arriving in the UK fall under the care of agencies, including local authorities and the UK Border Agency (UKBA), who have a statutory duty to safeguard and promote the welfare of children. The Children Act 1989 places a duty on local authorities to look after separated children.

Section 17 of the UK's Children Act 1989 states that:

1. It shall be the general duty of every local authority ... a. to safeguard and promote the welfare of children within their area who are in need.

Section 20 of the Children Act 1989 also states that:

1. Every local authority shall provide accommodation for any child in need within their area who appears to them to require accommodation as a result of – a. there being no person who has parental responsibility for him.

However, not all separated children are looked after under Section 20 of the Children Act 1989, but rather supported as children in need under Section 17 of the Act.⁷ Indeed, care systems for separated children in the UK are found to vary significantly, depending on the local authority that takes the child into care, often meaning that few children have the necessary adult support to help them with their day-to-day welfare or long-term protection needs (Brownlees and Finch, 2010; UNHCR PDES, 2010). Separated asylum-seeking children account for approximately 10 per cent of 'looked after children' and are mostly concentrated in London and the South East (Brownlees and Finch, 2010:8).

1.2.4 Right to Education

The rights of children who are seeking asylum or are refugees to education are enshrined in international and national legislative frameworks. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC),

⁶ Paragraph 37 states 'The decision maker cannot determine age solely on the basis of the appearance of the applicant. Family circumstances, educational background, activities during the previous few years and ethnic and cultural information should be taken into account. If there is a reason to doubt the applicant's statement as to his or her age, the decision maker will have to make an assessment of the applicant's credibility, and will have to ask questions designed to test credibility.'

⁷ Hek notes that "if unaccompanied young people are compared with other children in need under section 17 of the Children Act, ten per cent as compared with two per cent live independently" (Hek, 2005:8).

under article 3(1) states: “In all actions concerning children (...), the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration.” (United Nations, 1989). The same convention also states that children have a right to education. Education is also a human right, upheld in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

In the UK context, since the SMILE project was set up there has been a change of government from Labour to the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition, and a resultant shift in policy. The SMILE project was set up under Every Child Matters (ECM) (2004) a national framework to support the rights of children in England, regardless of immigration status (DCSF, 2004b). Under this policy framework, all children have the right to enjoy and achieve in education. The policy was incorporated into the Children Act 2004 (Crawley, 2005).

However, there is no specific educational policy for children who are seeking asylum or are refugees. The prime responsibility for the education of those children resides with the local authority (LA) (Pinson and Arnot, 2010). The newly formed Department for Education (DfE), previously the Department for Children Schools and Families (DCSF), responsible for education and children’s services, has recently altered the terminology in relation to ECM, replacing the term ‘every child matters’ with ‘help children achieve more’, whilst stating that it is committed to upholding the underlying principles of the framework.

In England, the Revised Schools Admission Code (DCSF, 2008) details the rights of children who are seeking asylum or are refugees, incorporated under the term ‘children from overseas’ – to education, giving them the same entitlement to schooling as other children. Schools and local authorities must ensure that all children of compulsory school age resident in that local authority are in receipt of suitable full time education, regardless of their immigration status.⁸ Admissions policies must also have regard to the Race Relations Act (1976) and Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000. Further, “if pupils have English as an additional language they are exempt from inclusion in school and LA league tables for a two year period. A head teacher can choose to include such a pupil in league tables, if desired” (DfES, 2004:8). Such guidance is to prevent schools’ concerns that accepting refugee children would lower league table results.

At the time of writing (December 2010) the schools system is currently undergoing huge changes as well as a reorganisation of the way that funding is distributed. The recently published White Paper The Importance of Teaching (DfE, 2010) has outlined significant changes to the way the education system in England and Wales will work, not least in relation to schools funding streams. A significant change is the removal of ring fenced funding, under which schools could access two grants to better support children who are seeking asylum or are refugees, the Ethnic Minority Achievement Grant (EMAG) and the Vulnerable Children Grant. However, as Pinson and Arnot (2010) note, this funding was not specifically targeted at refugee children and as such did not support the cluster of economic, health, emotional and social needs of such pupils. In addition, as it was devolved to schools once a year, it did not cater for those pupils who arrive in the middle of the school year (2010:253).⁹ Instead, it is proposed that there will be a single funding stream in the form of a Dedicated Schools Grant (DfE, 2010). In addition, from September 2011, the coalition government intends to introduce a ‘pupil premium’ to offer targeted help to every pupil eligible for free school meals with the aim of reducing educational inequalities. The level has been set at £430 per pupil, regardless of where they live. It remains to be seen what impact such changes will have on the education of refugee children.¹⁰

Whilst there is no statutory policy, in recognition of the barriers refugee children may face in relation to their education, guidance has been produced to suggest ways of working that will better support this group of young people in education. In particular, the DCSF’s New Arrivals Excellence Programme Guidance states:

Implicit throughout this guidance is the principle that all newly arrived bilingual learners have a right of access to the National Curriculum and that provision for newly arrived EAL [English as an Additional Language] learners is not separate but integrated into all subject areas. The focus is therefore on learning

⁸ As outlined by Section 14 of the Education Act 1996.

⁹ In 2007 an ‘Exceptional Circumstances Grant’ was introduced where additional funding can be triggered if the proportion of EAL pupils increases by 2.5 per cent across a local authority between the January count and the start of the school year.

¹⁰ See DfE press release dated 14.12.10 for further information: <http://www.wired.gov.net/wg/wg-news-1.nsf/Ifi/DNWA-8C5FXT>

and teaching in the mainstream classroom.
(DCSF, 2007:5)

The Guidance also makes particular reference to pupils arriving in Years 10 and 11, stating:

Where pupils arrive in Years 10 and 11, schools may want to consider a variety of models of induction which take account of the specific needs of this potentially vulnerable group. ... education provision should be tailored to the needs of the individual pupils while still ensuring the greatest possible access to the mainstream curriculum and future educational opportunities.
(DCSF, 2007:42).

Any alternative educational provision outside of the mainstream should be time bound and with clear objectives. Again the Guidance states:

In addition to quality first teaching which meets their needs on a daily basis, some children may require a short-term intervention programme to accelerate their progress in a particular area. This should always be time limited and, wherever possible, take place in the context of the classroom and be linked to classroom activities.
(DCSF, 2007:29).

This is in line with the Calderdale Judgement which found provision of separate language classes for children newly arrived from overseas to be discriminatory and thus unlawful under the Race Relations Act 1976.¹¹

The DfE White Paper (2010) also sets out to reduce the amount of guidance in circulation. The changes proposed also include the intention to revise the Admissions Code by 2011. With a focus on reducing the role of local authorities in the education system, the aim is for Academy status to become the norm for schools who will thus operate their own admissions. In light of the aforementioned difficulties refugee children face in these areas, it is likely these changes will further impact on their access to education.

For looked after children, there are specific duties placed upon local authorities in relation to education. These measures have been put in place in recognition of the fact that many children looked after by their local authority will face particular challenges in terms of engagement with schooling and that they are more likely to 'underachieve'. The Children Act 2004 placed a duty on local authorities to promote the educational achievement of looked after children. This means that they have to "give particular attention to the educational implications of any decision" in relation to looked after children (DfES, 2010:4).¹²

Separated children who are looked after by local authorities should be found a full-time education placement in a local mainstream school within 20 school days. The Education Act 2005 makes it a statutory responsibility to prioritise school admissions of looked after children, and the 2009 DCSF School Admissions Code recommends that children cared for under section 20 of the Children Act 1989 are given priority when placed on the waiting lists of oversubscribed schools (Children's Legal Centre, 2009:45).

1.3 Mentoring and befriending

Defining the concepts of mentoring and befriending is no easy task, as evidenced by research in this area; with some authors contending that mentoring is an ill-defined concept which can mean different things to

¹¹ The Calderdale Judgement followed a formal investigation in 1985/6 by the Commission for Racial Equality (CRE) into the practice of Calderdale LEA's English language support. Children who had newly arrived from the Indian sub-continent were required to take an English test and those who did not pass were placed in a separate language class or language centre. Children who attended a language centre spent months or even years there and followed a much narrower curriculum. The Secretary of State for Education agreed with the CRE's findings that Calderdale's separate provision was discriminatory and thus unlawful under the Race Relations Act 1976.

¹² 'Statutory guidance on the duty of local authorities to promote the educational achievement of looked after children under section 52 of the Children Act 2004' at:
http://www.everychildmatters.gov.uk/_files/AA4E7A197CEDF8F33A2D204F5C5F8CB9.pdf

different people (Roberts, 2000; Hall, 2003; Bennetts, 2003). The literature is even weaker in relation to defining befriending, this, it is suggested, is because befriending is less goal oriented and therefore less easy to evaluate (Sandford, Copps, and Yeowart, 2007). Nonetheless, there is general consensus that there is some considerable overlap between the two terms.

The Mentoring and Befriending Foundation state that:

...mentoring and befriending are very similar activities with some differences of emphasis. In general, they both involve the development of one-to-one relationships based upon trust, confidentiality and mutual involvement. The main difference is usually the emphasis placed on working towards goals. Mentoring tends to focus more on goal setting and operates within a clearly defined timeframe whilst befriending tends to develop more informal and supportive social relationships over a longer period of time...

(Mentoring and Befriending Foundation, 2008:6).

Some definitions are outlined below.

Mentoring

A mentor is someone who guides, encourages, motivates, teaches and inspires. Mentoring is based on mutual trust and respect. It is not a one-sided relationship but one of reciprocity, providing both mentee and mentor with the opportunity to learn new things and further their own personal development through their interactions with each other.

(From TimeTogether.org.uk)

Mentoring is a one-to-one, non-judgmental relationship in which an individual voluntarily gives time to support and encourage another. This is typically developed at a time of transition in the mentee's life, and lasts for a significant and sustained period of time.

(Active Community Unit, Home Office, 2001)

Befriending

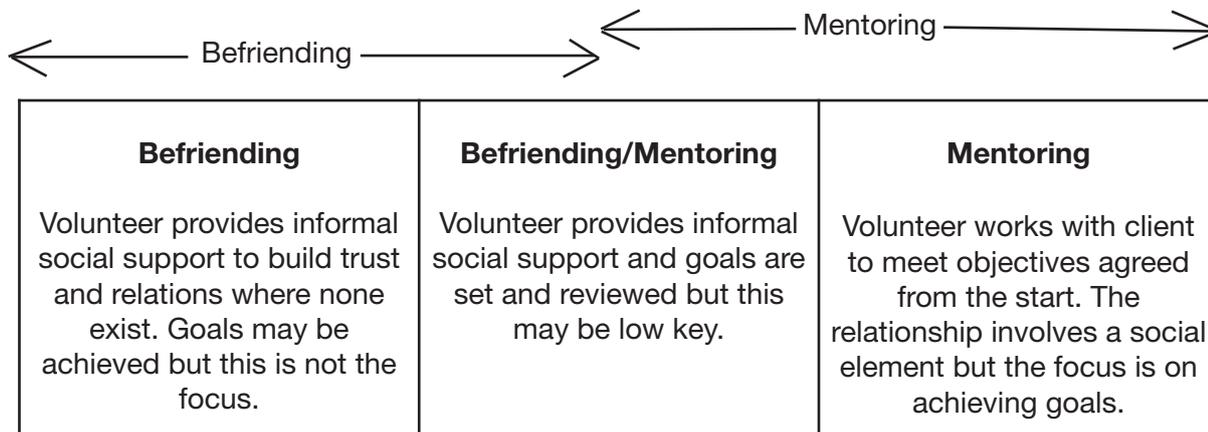
Befriending is a process whereby two or more people come together with the aim of establishing and developing an informal and social relationship... Ideally the relationship is non-judgmental, mutual, purposeful and there is commitment over time.

(Active Community Unit, Home Office, 2001)

The Befriending Network Scotland has developed a useful conceptual tool which uses the idea of a spectrum to understand the two terms.

The Befriending/Mentoring Spectrum

The Befriending/Mentoring Spectrum is based on the nature of the objectives in a supportive relationship, on the importance given to achieving those objectives and on the importance attached to the social aspect of the relationship:



Source: Befriending Network Scotland ¹³

1.3.1 Evidence of the impact of mentoring/befriending

One to one support in the form of mentoring was recognised by the previous government as an effective tool to aid refugee integration, first outlined in the 2002 White Paper Secure Borders Safe Haven (Home Office, 2002), particularly in relation to enabling refugees to make positive links with the wider community and understand the culture and values of the receiving country. Indeed, as a result, TimeTogether, a mentoring project with the specific aim of assisting refugees integrate into the UK, was set up.¹⁴ Evaluation of this project found that where pairs were carefully matched, mentoring ‘had made a powerful contribution’ to refugee integration (Esterhuizen and Murphy, 2007:24). The report identified the most significant impact to be the mentees’ boost in confidence. Additional areas in which mentees benefitted included improving their language skills, insights into UK life and culture and improved social networks (ibid). Where mentoring and befriending projects are focused on particular outcomes, there is evidence that they can have beneficial impact upon recipients (Dean and Goodlad, 1998; Roberts, 2000; Garvey and Alred, 2003; Esterhuizen and Murphy, 2007).

Research has shown that mentoring can be of particular benefit to young refugees, who are enabled to receive individual attention, reduce their isolation and increase confidence, as well as accessing services more easily (Save the Children, 2003). Children who are seeking asylum or are refugees who had no previous formal education are particularly found to benefit from having a mentor (Refugee Council, 2005). The fact the mentors or befrienders are volunteers and as such are not paid or under a professional or family obligation to spend time with recipients is found to be an important aspect in the relationship (Dean and Goodlad, 1998). Appropriate matching of volunteer and recipient is found to be key to successful relationships (Dean and Goodlad, 1998; Esterhuizen and Murphy, 2007). It is also important to note that mentoring can be a ‘mutually beneficial’ process; both mentor and mentee can gain from their relationship (Esterhuizen and Murphy, 2007). Interestingly, research suggests that mentors are often female rather than male (Dean and Goodlad, 1998; Hall, 2003).

Critiques of mentoring and befriending projects argue that such projects can over focus on pathologising the individual and are not a radical solution to social exclusion; they cannot tackle root causes of disadvantage and do little to address deep-rooted structural problems in society (Dean, and Goodlad, 1998; Hall, 2003). Further, the voice of mentoring recipients is often found to have not been taken into account (Hall, 2003; Cullen, 2006). It is important that the young people feel they have some input and control over what help they receive and that they are not merely passive recipients. Indeed, evidence shows that where young people are more actively involved in setting goals for the relationship, such relationships are more likely to be successful (Hall, 2003).

¹³ See <http://www.befriending.co.uk/> for further information.

¹⁴ For further information on TimeTogether see www.timetogether.org.uk

1.4 Raising Awareness: School Talks

Recent Refugee Council research with refugee young people found that most of the young people in the survey were unwilling to disclose their immigration status for fear of rejection or hostile reaction, such as the misrepresentation of asylum seekers in the press (Doyle and McCorriston, 2008). Indeed, there is a large body of literature which highlights the negative impact of hostile press coverage of refugees and asylum seekers, and the need to combat this through awareness raising and a more nuanced approach to reporting on asylum issues (for example, Buchanan et al. 2003; D’Onoforio and Munk, 2004; Greenslade, 2005; Lewis, 2005; Sandford and Lumley, 2006; Crawley, 2009). A Guardian article focusing on a school talk on asylum, provides an example as the journalist observing the talk noted that in the minds of the children the terms “illegal” and “asylum seeker” were inextricably linked (Guardian, 2007).

Further, research shows that many children who are seeking asylum or are refugees experience bullying and racism in schools (Rutter and Hyder, 1998; Rutter and Stanton, 2001; Hussein, 2007; Manyena & Brady, 2007; Doyle and McCorriston, 2008). All such reports call for more awareness raising, particularly in schools, in order to provide more accurate information about the realities of asylum in the UK and therefore greater understanding of other’s experiences. As Stephen Roman from the British Council states “Learning about other people and understanding different cultures is the key to a better school experience for everyone.”¹⁵

In the refugee sector, several voluntary organisations (for example, British Red Cross, Student Action for Refugees and the Refugee Council Talks Team) organise school talks and awareness raising events that target receiving communities.¹⁶ In addition, Refugee Week, now running for over a decade, is an annual UK-wide initiative that aims to deliver positive educational messages that counter fear, ignorance and negative stereotypes of refugees.¹⁷ However, currently there is little documented evidence of the impact of awareness-raising projects, particularly in the field of asylum.

Evaluating the impact of such projects on changing attitudes is complex and requires time and commitment from different stakeholders (British Red Cross, 2009; Crawley, 2009). Nonetheless, some evidence is available on the impact of strategies to change attitudes. For example, Crawley found that when people with experience of mental illness shared their experiences with others, it could cause attitudes to change (2009:15). The Information Centre about Asylum and Refugees (ICAR) has outlined principles of good practice for changing attitudes on the basis of its significant research expertise in this area, which also includes using individual stories to humanise the statistics and processes. In this way, opinions are based on actual experiences and not media stories or myth. The report also recommends that service providers in contact with local communities and asylum seekers (such as schools) should be equipped with information and resources to promote understanding (D’Onoforio and Munk, 2004).

Further, evaluation of a refugee awareness raising project found that beneficiary organisations cited the positive difference the project had made to refugee integration and that through changing the attitudes and understanding of attendees in awareness raising sessions, incidents of harassment were reduced and positive relationships facilitated (Waddington and Phillimore, 2009).¹⁸ In relation to awareness raising initiatives in an educational setting, a Red Cross report on combating discrimination, whilst acknowledging the lack of evaluation on the impact of educational programmes on behavioural change, states that there is nonetheless “large consensus on the importance of education in reducing discrimination and other forms of violence” (Tawil and Azami-Tawil, 2001:25).

¹⁵ Cited in relation to a British Council report which found that instances of bullying were higher among migrant children in the UK <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/education/7270880.stm>

¹⁶ See <http://www.refugeeweek.org.uk/simple-acts/twenty-acts/tea/talks-teams> for further information.

¹⁷ See www.refugeeweek.org.uk

¹⁸ For more information on the project see <http://www.refugee-action.org.uk/RAP/>

2. About the research

2.1 Aims

The aims of the research were to investigate the educational and social contributions that mentors and befrienders make in the lives of children who are seeking asylum or are refugees, as well as the impact of awareness-raising activities in schools and the impact of providing social activities for young people.

The research was undertaken using an action research approach, a process where monitoring and evaluation run beside activities.¹⁹ This approach allows the project team to reflect on what is happening in the project and to change practice if the research identifies problems or ways to improve activities, and as such respond to participants' experiences in real time. Overall the research aimed to collect evidence about 'what works', to inform the development of policy and practice.

2.2 Methodology

A mixture of methods was used to achieve these objectives. The methods adopted were mainly qualitative and data was collected from the outset of the project until 31st October 2010, although the project still had five months left to run.

2.3 Interviews

Evidence was drawn from qualitative interviews conducted in the three project regions (London, West Midlands, and Yorkshire and Humberside) with volunteers and young people as well as the three Volunteer Coordinators, who managed volunteers and oversaw the relationships and could therefore provide an overview of SMILE experiences in each area. The aim was for interviews to be conducted in such a way as to have equal geographical spread. However, owing to time constraints and the desire to reflect the demographics of volunteers and young people, in the end this was not possible.

A total of 39 interviews have been conducted with 17 volunteers (nine befrienders and eight mentors), 19 young people (ten befriendees and nine mentees) and the Volunteer Coordinators in each of the three regions. This represents a sample of just under 20 per cent of the young people who took part in the project at the end of the data collection phase. Interviews with volunteers and young people were conducted upon completion of the mentoring relationship and both half-way and at the end of the befriending relationship so as to gather a comprehensive picture of the dynamics in the longer term relationship.

To some extent, Volunteer Coordinators did act as gatekeepers in terms of the selection of interviewees. However, where possible researchers endeavoured to select and contact pairs directly, utilising the project database, in order to remove any potential bias.

Children and young people

Children and young people interviewed ranged in age from ten to 18 years old.²⁰ Nationalities reflect the demographics of separated children in the UK overall, with the majority being boys from Afghanistan (see

¹⁹ Action research has been defined as "the study of a social situation with a view to improving the quality of action within it." (Elliott, 1991:69). Further, "action research is conducted by, with and for people, rather than research on people." (Reason and McArdle, 2004).

²⁰ Ages are those given by young people not the age they have been disputed as where the dispute had not yet been resolved.

table in Appendix 1 for demographics of young people). All children and young people gave their informed consent and researchers explained the research processes, objectives and outcomes. It was explained that interviews were confidential, including from the SMILE project workers who had direct contact with individuals, save where any child protection issues should arise, and all information would be anonymised. Interpreters were used, unless the young person wished, and was able, to communicate in English. Most interviews were conducted at Refugee Council offices in the three different project regions as young people were comfortable with that location and often could combine their interview with a visit to another professional/ class they wished to attend, thus saving time and/or bus fare. Where necessary, or preferred, interviews were conducted in other locations. For children in families, owing to the young age of these particular children, interviews were conducted at the young person's home in the presence of their parent/s, who also participated in the interview.

Volunteers (Mentors and befrienders)

Volunteers interviewed ranged in age from 23 to over 60 years old. In line with previous literature about mentoring and befriending, the overwhelming majority of volunteers were female. Only two of the volunteers interviewed were male, which reflected the make up of the volunteer profile during the time interviews were conducted, although interestingly this did change a little towards the end of the project with numbers of male volunteers increasing slightly, particularly in Yorkshire and Humberside.

Volunteer Coordinators

As interviews were conducted at the mid-way stage and end of the relationship, the majority of those interviewed reflected relationships that in the main had 'worked'. In order to capture data on less successful relationships or 'what did not work', interviews were conducted with Volunteer Coordinators at three monthly intervals in the second year of the project onwards. As the people responsible for managing volunteers and relationships in each region, Volunteer Coordinators were able to give more of an overview of the project and highlight any trends emerging. In this way, researchers were able to capture policy issues that could reflect upon what was happening across many relationships.

2.4 School talks

At the end of the data collection phase of the research (end October 2010) SMILE Volunteer Coordinators and school talk volunteers conducted 55 school talks and training sessions to raise awareness about refugee issues among pupils and school staff. Wherever possible, those giving the talks collected information from pupils before and after the talks to assess whether knowledge and attitudes had changed. A total of 500 pupils from ten different schools gave feedback on school talks.

Teachers were also asked to reflect on the impact of the talks after it had taken place. However, researchers struggled to get much response from teachers, particularly in follow up questionnaires. Despite the researchers' best efforts, once talks had been conducted it was very difficult to ensure teachers responded to requests for feedback which then compromised the measurement of the longer-term impact of the talks. Nonetheless, the 16 teachers that responded did provide some measure of the immediate impact and pupils' understanding of the talk and the issues faced by refugees in the UK.

2.5 Additional data

In addition, data has been collected through questionnaires completed by young people and volunteers on their project aspirations and outcomes at the beginning of the relationship, as well as from the project team's own record keeping. Research findings were continuously fed back to the project team to improve practice and as a mechanism for young people and volunteers to provide confidential feedback on the project.

Researchers also collected data from a selection of the social activities set up for young people. Questionnaires were sent to organisers of the Crossworld Football Project, the SMILE Documentary Film Project, the Social Evening (a weekly youth club), the Young Women's Social Evening and the Soundmix Music Project. In addition, young people attending the social evening and Crossworld were interviewed and questionnaires sent to young people in the Homework club in Leeds.

2.6 Methodological changes

In line with the action research approach, as issues arose during the interviews, changes were made to incorporate these and respond accordingly. The following methodological changes were made.

The issue of age disputes arose spontaneously during initial interviews and therefore it was decided to alter the original interview schedule to capture information on this subject, as it was clearly impacting young people greatly and formed a significant backdrop to their experiences.

The original interview schedule was not capturing information about access to education so it was therefore decided to add this as an additional question, as well as to capture data on the length of time taken to access education and reasons why young people were not in education. The issues of young people's relationship with social workers and/or keyworkers also arose spontaneously in several interviews. It was therefore decided to analyse this further by including a question in the interview schedule on this subject to ensure further data was captured and researchers were able to reflect young people's experiences accurately.

Interviews with befriending pairs during the final research phase were conducted only once and before the pairs had ended their relationship. This was due to a pattern emerging of befriending pairs surpassing the one year mark and deciding, in conjunction with the Volunteer Coordinator, to continue the relationship. Researchers therefore felt it important to capture reasons behind the continuations.

It was established that the original questionnaires for school talks feedback were overly complicated for pupils, particularly younger ones and therefore the questions were altered to three, simpler questions in a before and after format. This questionnaire also allowed an analysis of attitudinal change, rather than testing increased levels of knowledge after the talk.

It emerged during interviews with young people that they felt the social activities had been of particular benefit to them. Researchers therefore decided to collect data from a selection of these activities (Social Evening, Young Women's Social Evening, Film Project, Soundmix music project and Crossworld football project) to capture how young people felt they were benefitting from such activities. Researchers interviewed twelve young people involved in the Social Evening and seven young people involved in Crossworld. 15 young people completed questionnaires about the Homework club in Leeds. In addition, questionnaires were sent to organisers of all SMILE social activities.

2.7 Analysis

Interviews were transcribed and analysed using NVivo qualitative data analysis computer software package which allows data to be coded more systematically. NVivo facilitates the organisation and analysis of non-numerical or unstructured data, such as interview transcripts, enabling information to be sorted, arranged and classified. This allows for a deeper level of analysis, providing a comprehensive and systematic approach to identifying trends and cross-examining information gathered.

3. SMILE Relationships: an analysis

The key focus of the SMILE project was to assist refugee children to access education and help them achieve more educationally. Researchers therefore analysed relationships through the lens of the educational and social contributions that mentors and befrienders made in the lives of the young people, but also looked into whether there was any reciprocal beneficial impact on volunteers. Volunteers and young people's views and experiences were compared and contrasted to establish whether there were any anomalies in the perception of relationships, or if pairs mirrored each others' views.

At the end of the data collection phase, a total of 101 young people have been supported by either a mentor or befriender through SMILE.²¹ In some instances, relationships started out as mentoring and then developed into befriending relationships, through agreement with all involved, and where it was felt there was an ongoing need. Researchers interviewed mentoring pairs at the end of their relationship and befriending pairs at a mid-way point and the end of their relationship in order to capture a more detailed longitudinal picture of the longer-term befriending relationship. From the outset it was striking how positive the interviews conducted were, with both young people and volunteers. Of course, research bias must be noted in that researchers worked for the Refugee Council, and therefore, despite assurance of confidentiality from the project team, respondents may have held certain assumptions or felt obliged to 'give the researcher what they felt we wanted'. Nonetheless, even accounting for such bias the positive responses from both young people and volunteers were striking in their frequency.

3.1 Volunteer motivations

What motivates volunteers to give up their free time and take on a voluntary role is crucial for understanding how to keep volunteers engaged. Volunteers in the SMILE project expressed a range of motivations for wishing to volunteer: many had heard of the Refugee Council or had already had some involvement and were interested in continuing to volunteer for the organisation.

Others expressed a desire to help others or to gain experience of working with young people, particularly asylum seekers and refugees as they expressed concern about the difficulties this group of young people can face in the UK and a desire to help young people integrate. They saw this as an area that they could assist in and wanted to feel they were helping somebody.

a number of things [motivated me]. Doing something helpful on a really basic level ... and the issue, I think in the UK [asylum] is obviously a sort of really hot topic, and in my mind at that time there was a lot of negativity about it from other people in the media and it was something I believe is a good cause, so yeah that is why I went for it.

Befriender, Greater London

A number of volunteers were refugees or asylum seekers themselves and felt that they wanted to help others go through this process, which they had found difficult to do alone, noting that the role of the volunteer could fill a gap in meeting young people's support needs.

As an asylum seeker I know the problems other asylum seekers will be facing. I also know my social worker(s) weren't there. I had to do nearly everything myself at the same age as most of SMILE clients. Problems I faced myself made it difficult to settle down, I mostly kept myself to myself, which slows down self development. Becoming a mentor/ befriender is something I thought I can do to help others that are in the same position.

Befriender, Yorkshire and Humberside

²¹ These numbers are to end October 2010 and therefore do not reflect overall project numbers.



I was referred to project by a voluntary association. Before that I was a refugee - new in the country and not knowing where to go when it came to GP, school and other places. Being a mentor will help mentees that were in the same position as I was when I newly came, as a social worker is not always able to take you around.

Befriender, Yorkshire and Humberside

The majority of volunteers interviewed had no preference as to whether they wished to be a mentor or befriender, but rather just wanted to support a young person improve their life. A commonality in all volunteers' motivations was a perceived value in the project and the opportunity to make a difference to somebody's life.

I didn't really mind between mentor and befriender, the only thing was the end result, like to help the young person.

Befriender, Yorkshire and Humberside

3.2 Expectations

Before being matched with a volunteer, Volunteer Coordinators carried out an initial assessment of needs with young people to establish what they wanted from the SMILE project. Researchers also asked young people and volunteers they interviewed about their expectations of the project. The main areas young people wanted help with were improving their English language skills, finding an educational placement, and accessing social activities. Other areas included assistance with homework, understanding UK life and culture, local area orientation, tackling issues of bullying, and just having somebody to talk to.

I wanted somebody to help me with language ... to learn the language and ... to help me with buying clothes, ... and help me like how to live in this country.

Boy mentee, Yorkshire and Humberside

Expectations from volunteers were in line with what young people expressed, in that they were prepared to help young people improve their language skills, confidence and in the case of mentors help them find an educational placement:

Well, I knew that I was going to be helping her get a school place, and then the other aspect of it was really, I suppose, the language, getting her familiar with how things work over here, perhaps helping with school work.

Befriender (started as mentor), West Midlands

3.3 Goal setting

The Volunteer Coordinator (and an interpreter where necessary) assisted at the first meeting between volunteer and young person, during which a mentoring and befriending action plan was drawn up. After the initial meeting, volunteers and young people met by themselves generally every week for a period of between three-twelve months, sometimes longer. SMILE aims to enable the young people involved in the project to identify what help they need and, together with volunteers, to work towards achieving their objectives. As previous research has shown (Hall, 2003), for relationships to be successful it is important that young people feel they have some input and control over what help they receive and that they are not merely passive recipients.

I really allowed him to try and lead where the session can go from what felt good for him, but he was very open to things...

Mentor, Yorkshire & Humberside

There is nothing to say I don't like, because he was always asking me like do you want to play football, or do you want to study or do you want to read.

Boy befriender, Greater London

There was a noticeable difference between mentoring and befriending relationships in how volunteers viewed the idea of targets. In befriending relationships, volunteers felt that targets were more intangible and less easy to set. Whilst they worked towards pre-established goals such as improving English, assisting with homework or boosting confidence, most befrienders stated they did not 'formally' set targets as it did not feel right to the nature of the relationship, rather they allowed young people to express what they wanted.

Not on paper. Not so rigidly to be honest. It just didn't feel natural that way. It didn't really work out that way, but that was because [befriender] didn't really need that I would say... he said the main thing he wanted me to help him with was his English so that's what we did really.

Befriender, Greater London

By comparison, mentors viewed the idea of targets differently, in that they felt they had an ascribed objective to find their mentee an educational placement and this primarily defined their relationship.

3.4 Benefits to young people

Evidence from the research findings highlights how volunteers have had a significant positive impact on the young people. Through the regular contact and commitment of volunteers, young people were able to progress and develop to achieve more educationally, socially, and perhaps more importantly for those young people not in education, to actually access an educational placement.

3.4.1 Help in accessing education

Securing an educational placement for young people is one of the main aims of SMILE, and the problems experienced by asylum seekers and refugees in accessing schooling was a catalyst for establishing the project. At the end of the data collection phase (October 2010), thanks to the intervention of SMILE volunteers, the project has assisted a total of 57 young people in the three regions access a school or

college placement, some of whom were supported by the Volunteer Coordinator in London to access education without actually having a mentor. This is due to the dual nature of this Volunteer Coordinator's role (also working as a Youth Activities worker for the Refugee Council) and the fact that he was located in the Refugee Council Children's Section, from where more referrals came through to him for this particular issue. This highlights the close working nature between the SMILE project and the Refugee Council's children's services, who also provided additional support for SMILE, as well as the acute need for a project such as SMILE. One of the catalysts for setting up the SMILE project was the numbers of young people the Children's Section saw who were out of education and desperate to find a placement.

All of the nine mentees interviewed found an educational placement with the support of their mentor, however in some cases it took longer than the three months initially prescribed for mentoring relationships. This was primarily owing to difficulties with waiting times for further education colleges; those applying after the start of term were often forced to wait until the next academic year for a place. The barriers young people faced in accessing education are discussed in greater detail in the next section.

One year I don't have a education. But the first time I meet her [my mentor] she is fill in the form for college and for seven or five college apply for me. I apply different college yeah. After that I decide which college is good.

Boy mentee, Greater London

For mentoring pairs, accessing an educational placement was perhaps the most important impact that volunteers have made in the lives of the young people and is reflected as such in the feedback from research participants, both volunteers and young people.

Getting him regular daily school, that was probably the most beneficial thing for him.

Mentor, Yorkshire and Humberside

I think [the most important thing] is the college placement. Because it gave him hope and direction - it made him see there is a future and there is something for him to hold on to, because he was desperate to get into a college.

Mentor, Greater London

She is very good because I don't have any family in this country and she helped me about my education, and she speak with me and ... she is very nice.

Boy mentee, Greater London

Without the assistance of volunteers, young people felt they would not have been able to secure an educational placement.

Finding college was very important for me, and I didn't have anyone to help me. I couldn't find college on my own.

Boy mentee, Greater London

Going to college ... I couldn't myself and [my mentor] managed to.

Boy mentee, West Midlands

Volunteers were pivotal to finding their mentees an educational placement. Mentors assisted in a number of ways such as advocating on behalf of their mentee, contacting schools and colleges, supporting young people in completing application forms and accompanying young people to assessments and interviews. Even such simple actions as local area orientation and showing young people the correct bus routes played a part in enabling young people to access education. The complexities of the English education system and disorientation of being in a new country facing a language and cultural barrier is such that for refugee and asylum seeking young people, the assistance of their mentor was crucial in finding them a place.

So I went through all the colleges in his area that were commutable for him. And we went through them, ... basically the support I provided in that sense was I helped him complete application forms; I organise interviews for him; helped him to interviews...

Mentor, Greater London

And I show him the ways and take him to the college and I enrolled him in his college and ... and he couldn't speak English so, because the [bus] drivers they should understand where he want to get off then I make a piece of paper, I write it down: 'Driver please let me know when the college is come because I can't speak English'. So I give him and I was behind and I say show this for the driver and then the bus driver they understand and say OK. Yeah, so I make it easy for him to find.

Mentor, West Midlands

3.4.2 Help achieving in education

Refugee and asylum seeking young people also faced barriers in achieving in education in terms of schoolwork, settling into the school environment and interacting with their peers, which volunteers were able to assist in breaking down. For example, the mother of a girl mentee who had not been to school before coming to the UK noted how her daughter's ability to interact with her peers and understand lessons improved after being assigned a SMILE mentor:

In the school she have more friend and is OK, she understand what the talking and how to play.

Mother of girl mentee, Greater London

Volunteers also assisted young people with their studies, enabling them to achieve more in their education and providing invaluable assistance on a one to one basis to young people, developing their confidence.

Yeah [my mentor] helped me to study to prepare for the classes, for example when I started learning numbers and spellings I received a lot of support from her and she would help me once a week to prepare for the studies.

Mentee boy, Yorkshire and Humberside

I think she has a lot more confidence at college, her teachers are really impressed because of the extra support she was getting from me and I think that had a knock on effect on how they treated her in the class. ... Yeah, her teachers think she is brilliant. ... she hadn't really gelled with her class before we met. She had only just started, but she had been moved out of foster care and it hadn't been very nice, and she had missed quite a lot of school before, so I think me giving her that kind of one to one support with her schoolwork really helped her stand out in class as a hard worker.

Befriender, Greater London

Well, she has definitely grown in confidence over that time, and because I help her with school work too, she has become more confident at school and more able to express herself with her peers.

Befriender, Yorkshire and Humberside

Volunteers also played a role in helping young people deal with issues such as bullying, English language and assisting them settle in school.

I was having lots of problem - I can't speak English and everyone was fighting me ... because I can't speak English and ... now no one speak to me and I am happy ... because [befriender] always help me lots and sometimes I can't understand and she tell me.

Girl befriender, Yorkshire and Humberside

3.4.3 Language assistance

Aside from accessing education, young people felt the most important thing they had achieved through SMILE was to improve their English, which was in line with their expectations. Initially, many of the young people had a poor grasp of English and the first meetings were conducted with an interpreter. However, going forward many volunteers and young people met up and communicated in English. Whilst acknowledging that at times communication was limited, the language barrier was not mentioned as an issue by either young people or volunteers. Young people appreciated the opportunity to speak in English on a one to one basis and volunteers saw it as part of their role to assist young people to improve their language skills and build up confidence.

Speaking English and reading. If [befriender] not here I can't speak English or reading or writing.
Girl befriender, Yorkshire and Humberside

The most important things was before my English wasn't very good I couldn't go to shop and buy things but now I can, I am much better now.
Boy befriender, Yorkshire and Humberside

[my mentor] gave me confidence to speak English ...I couldn't speak English very well, but now I could speak.
Girl befriender, West Midlands

He is getting more confident, his English is much better. There was a time I bumped into a friend of his when I was with him and his friend didn't speak English at all so he was the one interpreting. And he was joking that, well, 'normally you need an interpreter to speak to me –now I am the interpreter!'
Befriender, Yorkshire and Humberside

Volunteers also provided informal language classes to the young people, giving them homework or short exercises; many also met in the library and read books together. Young people really appreciated this input, particularly those who were waiting for college places as it enabled them to develop and progress in the meantime. Even for those who did not have informal lessons, just the act of meeting on a weekly basis and speaking English in a relaxed environment has proved really beneficial for SMILE young people, all of whom felt their English had improved.

... now [my mentor] is giving homework...because I am bored you know, all the time I stay the home so I say please you give me some homework!
Girl mentee, West Midlands

I using library and get the book from the library so it was easy for me to ask and he was helping me to read.
Boy befriender, Greater London

3.4.4 Increasing confidence

A key theme to emerge from interviews with both young people and volunteers was how the support of volunteers had aided young people to feel more confident in their language and ability to deal with everyday situations. Such actions enabled young people to reduce their isolation and build resilience; key factors in helping young people integrate and alleviate the traumas they have experienced, as previous research has shown (Hart, 2009; Brownlees and Finch, 2010).

A simple act was when I walked into a café he'd not been into that kind of environment so I actually getting up, getting sugar and getting milk and asking for particular things and showing him a menu, ... that was just kind of empowering, I think, for him.
Mentor, Yorkshire and Humberside

I suppose to start with when we went to cafes and stuff she wouldn't order or ask for anything because she was too shy or she didn't know what to say, or she would just follow my lead. Whereas now she feels a lot more confident, well, she is quite bossy! ...if I buy her some food before we go to a meeting or something, if she has not finished it she will ask for like a take away box to take it home in, which she would never have done before.

Befriender, Greater London

Again, similar views were held in relationship pairs, reflecting that both young people and volunteers held the same views on progress.

I think one of my main overall aims was to just help with his confidence really and ... and I think over time that he has really developed anyway, ... just as his English has improved he has got better and, like, the more we do things. Like, we went to the bank together to open a bank account and I was like 'well, it's your bank account so you need to lead' ... And he was, like, 'yeah, that's fine' and then that was only a few months ago and then he was really good and going in and I was like just be polite and stuff and he was really good. He was, like, 'good morning sir', like, talking to the person behind the counter; 'I have all my documents with me'. ... and then we went and sat down and I said 'how was that?' he said 'yeah, I tried.'

Befriender, Yorkshire and Humberside

... things were really good when she was helping but now I feel confident to continue doing what I am doing ... I thought it was really difficult for me to do these kind of things but now I find easy.

Boy befriender, Yorkshire and Humberside

Young people themselves noted how the relationship had changed their language ability and feelings of confidence, enabling them to feel more independent and able to deal with things themselves, and as a result increasing their self-esteem.

The ability that I can speak English, I can solve my problem because of this I am feeling very good. ... I am feeling independent, because when I go to the doctor and I make an appointment, I can do it myself, which I couldn't do it before.

Boy befriender, Greater London

First I came here it was like so strange and everything was new, [my befriender] helped me like try things and experience them and I get confident ... now, I can speak very well and also I can speak with everyone, is better.

Girl befriender, West Midlands

3.4.5 Social integration

Volunteers also played the role of cultural guide for young people, providing an opportunity for them, the majority of whom had only been in the UK for a few months, to understand British culture and values. Feeling more secure in their new social landscape and being able to learn from mentors in a non-threatening environment was found to be really valuable by many young people.

Like when I first come I can't speak English and got no friends, now she make me have friends because I've learnt some thing from her. Like she, if someone's birthday in the school and maybe they leaving she give me something to take for them like a card or something.

Girl befriender, Yorkshire and Humberside

[My mentor] say how to live in England she taught me like that.

Boy mentee, Yorkshire and Humberside

Then I suppose, silly things like she didn't realise that she could buy milk outside of Iceland! She was, like, making ridiculous long treks across London to buy milk from various shops. ... and I got her a TV. So, she was much more able to watch TV shows and feel like she is watching the same things as everybody else, you know she likes X Factor and stuff, and I think she really enjoyed feeling like she knew what everybody in her class was talking about. So that's been good.

Befriender, Greater London

3.4.6 Alleviating loneliness

A striking undercurrent from the interviews conducted with separated children was how very lost and alone they felt and how the one to one support and attention they received from SMILE volunteers helped alleviate their loneliness, as well as building up their confidence and social skills. Particularly for separated children who may still be experiencing emotional trauma from the loss of their family or anxiety over what happened to them, as well as the uncertainty over their own future, having somebody to talk to can contribute significantly to their well being.

Indeed, having somebody to talk to and share their experiences with was really valued by the young people involved in SMILE. As previous research has shown, the presence of a caring adult can help young people increase their resilience, through developing confidence and self-esteem and improving language skills.²² It would appear from research findings that SMILE young people did benefit in these ways.

I am not feel alone now, because if I have something [my befriender] helping me with that and every time she ask me as well 'what you have problem, how can I help you?' – every time she ask me so I am not feel alone like before. She helped me a lot. If I feel something, I share it with her. Like friend, I feel, like that. I feel like friend with [befriender] ...Like, if I have something to worry I am just telling her.

Girl mentee, Greater London

She is like my friend. She like speak, me and her speak together about my life and she speak about her life.

Boy mentee, Greater London

[befriender] is your friend, is your really friend.

Boy befriender, West Midlands

On the emotional side, I think it was just consistently being there every week for him. So being a consistant face for him to see, being a friendly face, being happy, trying to listen. I think he was very desperate to talk to somebody.

Mentor, Greater London

Volunteers and young people in befriending relationships developed particularly strong bonds owing to the long term nature of relationships. The regular presence of volunteers who met with young people on a weekly basis, showing an interest in them and providing a source of stability enabled young people to develop bond of trust with their volunteer. Young people who were at first shy subsequently opened up as the relationship developed.

He has been disclosing more lately, and I quite often get a smile out of him now as opposed to before it was all a bit more closed. ... now ...he has opened up a lot as a person. He is a lot happier than he was when I met him; he was quite grim about his situation when I met him at that time.

Befriender, Greater London

Volunteer Coordinators also noted how the regular contact and reliable influence of volunteers increased young people's confidence and self esteem.

²² For example, Refugee Council, 2005; Hart, 2009; Brownlees and Finch, 2010.

It provides young people with a chance to offload and talk about families. Helps them to trust another person and provides a stabilising and reliable influence...I think it is about trust, and they trust that we are there and we like them and are interested, and they respond to that. That's what it is really.
Volunteer Coordinator 2

Many young people talk to their mentors more than anyone else. They won't open up to people outside the Refugee Council – we're seen as impartial so they feel comfortable talking to us.
Volunteer Coordinator 3

Children who came with their families also noted how their befriender could provide extra support for them and they felt comfortable sharing their experiences with their befriender, believing that they would understand.

I think to have someone to talk with. Yeah, because we haven't got friends, no, we have got friends, but not like [befriender]. So it was helpful to speak with someone like that ... if you have friends is just school, so that's different. With [befriender] we can speak about everything.
Girl befriender, West Midlands

This was a view several young people expressed; that when they were at school or college they did not wish to share their experiences with other young people who they felt would not understand. It was therefore very valuable for them to have someone in whom they could confide, who would understand and not judge them.

My college friend, all body is family this country [so] I not telling about my life, I not telling because all people [have] family and parents so I no got anything so I no telling.
Girl befriender, West Midlands

Young people viewed volunteers as different to other professionals, as someone there for them who they could trust. The fact that volunteers were spending time with them not for pay or professional obligation, was viewed as very important by young people, as indicated by previous research (Dean and Goodlad, 1998).

She is easy. I don't know... is not like serious, only to come only for work. She is not like that person. Like some people come only for their work, then she is not like that. She... it is easy to talk to her.
Girl befriender, Greater London

Young people going through the asylum system are also faced with having to undergo many interviews, where their life stories and age they say they are is not always believed, which can be very frustrating and disorientating. The fact that volunteers believed in them and were there for them without judging them played an important role in enabling young people to open up and share their experiences. All young people interviewed felt their volunteer understood their needs and they were happy to share their problems with their volunteer, trusting that they would not be judged.

Yeah I share with [befriender] everything ... Because, you know, she is believe me and she is giving some advice. She is good person. I like her.
Girl befriender, West Midlands

Yeah, I like she because she is listening to me.
Boy mentee, Greater London

... she was the only person around and I would share all troubles with her because she would help me.
Boy mentee, Yorkshire and Humberside

However, most young people had an understanding that their volunteer could not help them with every aspect of their lives, and realistic expectations of the kind of support they could receive.

... like for example, she don't know about the housing. Like, or something she couldn't do it, like if she could, she could do. But something she couldn't do it's not up to her.

Girl befriender, Greater London

I had a lot of problem but I didn't mention anything for [my mentor], just college and she did her best ...[because]... I knew that she won't be able to help me in those matters.

Boy mentee, Greater London

3.4.7. Pastoral care

Volunteers also played a pastoral role, helping young people in other aspects of their lives such as purchasing items for the home or items of clothing, enabling young people to feel more settled.

Yeah, when she came she never late and she never miss the appointment and if I ask her something, even I didn't have kettle and microwave, even a chair I don't have in my room. When I want to write the homework I am sitting on my bed. Now she told me she find the chair ... So she has helped me with that as well. I haven't got any furniture, nothing so I am just telling her I don't have this, I don't have this, she is trying to get. Even herself. She is helping me.

Girl befriender, Greater London

When I first saw my mentee ... it was extremely cold and he needed clothing and it was winter and it snowed. So I was able to assist him with that and sort things out

Mentor, Yorkshire and Humberside

Befrienders also found themselves acting as sources of knowledge for young people, who did not have other figures in their lives who could fulfil this role. This was particularly important for separated young people without family in the UK. Young people also often expressed their view that volunteers were 'like my mum', or 'like my grandma', in that they functioned as a kind of parental role.

She was very friendly she was like my grandma! ... when I had an operation she was very helpful, ... and she was supportive ... everything I asked about she did.

Boy befriender, Greater London

Our relationship became a lot more about talking about like ... like not like moral things but a lot more just things about like racism, ... like he was reading the travel guide and there was a bit on lesbian and gay travel and he was like 'oh what do those words mean?', and then so I kind of explained it to him and he was like 'oh I always wondered what those words meant but I never really had anyone to ask.'

Befriender, Yorkshire and Humberside

So I spent a whole two hours trying to explain what cancer was. It was really, really hard. So things like that I wasn't quite expecting ... You kind of think I am here to help her with her education and to, you know, take her on educational trips and then boom: 'what's cancer?!' And you're like 'OH! Huh! What is cancer? – I don't know!'

Befriender, Greater London

Volunteers and young people's view about the impact of the relationship were generally aligned. Responses mirrored those of the other party in the pair. The responses from this mentoring pair reflect the similarities that both the volunteer and young person felt in the relationship:

I think obviously the fact that he's got a place at college is a massive thing, really. ... But also I think that just giving him somebody, just being there, like I think he knows he could talk to me now if there is something really bothering him, I think he would talk to me about it. And just kind of showing that somebody cares a little bit and I have, I didn't give-up on him, maybe somebody that he can trust a little bit, as well as finding him a college place.

Mentor, Greater London

... the best thing is I think about the education. Yes. I am happy about that. And the second time I am happy she [mentor] is like coming my friend. She speak, she spend her time with me...

Boy mentee, Greater London

The majority of young people said the thing they enjoyed the most from SMILE was the opportunity to talk with somebody in English and so improve their confidence and language skills. They also appreciated the opportunity to take trips out and learn more about their new environment. Such activities enabled young people to feel more settled and at home in their new surroundings.

Key evidence of the benefit of the project is that all but one of the nineteen young people interviewed said that they would recommend the SMILE project to other young people in their situation, namely young people without friends or family and with little command of English.

People, many people in my situation, may be in need and needing support, and so from my own experience I got support and help, I would recommend to other people as well the benefit of [SMILE project]

Boy mentee, West Midlands

Yeah, I would [recommend SMILE] ... Because it is nice, it is helping the people, like someone who don't have family, like me, and who don't have supporter. It's good.

Girl befriender, Greater London

I recommended [SMILE] to other people, and I brought them here to meet people here ... I explained the benefit of doing this and I said your problems may get solved so I tried to introduce them to this place.

Boy mentee, Yorkshire and Humberside

Only one young person interviewed did not wish to recommend the project. In the case of this young person, what appears to have happened is that her mentor over promised on what she could deliver, and then when those things failed to materialise, the young person felt let down.

... what disappointed me was, like, my mentor never kept her word. That is the only thing, but otherwise I think I have benefited from because when I first came I did not know how to get around and how to go to school or anything. And this person showed me how to do that.

Girl mentee, Yorkshire and Humberside

3.4.8 Support to families

One issue that arose through the research that volunteers had not anticipated was the relationship with the families of young people. Owing to the young age of children in families supported by SMILE, volunteers usually visited young people at their family home in the presence of one or more parent. Volunteers established a relationship with the parents over time, which was appreciated by both volunteers and parents.

Yeah and if we've got like a problem like we've got a form we can't do or homework she fill it for us and she read for us and help my dad.

Girl befriender, Yorkshire and Humberside

because [befriender] always help us and she is really kind and we really like, our whole family, and [befriender] don't feel tired because [befriender] play with baby so she not tired

Mother of girl befriender, Yorkshire and Humberside

One volunteer is working with a girl who lives with her father, [they were] given a partly furnished flat. Volunteer has helped with purchasing items such as bedding. Helping girl settle at school, get school uniform but also supporting dad in terms of helping them settle and helping him understand how things work. ... she has become someone who has supported them both, really.
Volunteer Coordinator 1

At times with the additional relational dynamics, it led to volunteers needing to expand their role.

what I didn't realise was, because I am visiting a family, ... I wasn't just going to see [befriender] I was going to see her mother and baby and trying to interact between them as her mum didn't speak English and it became a different situation really. I wasn't just going to help [befriender], I helped [befriender] by helping mum as well. I think [my role] just had to expand. It wasn't, I wouldn't say it was ever compromised, but just expanded, it became more inclusive
Befriender, Yorkshire and Humberside

3.4.9 Interaction with social workers

During the interviews, the issue of some friction with social services arose without the researcher directly asking about them. Researchers therefore decided to investigate this further. Several volunteers and young people noted that young people rarely saw their social worker and that often appointments were missed and social workers failed to attend or confirm them.

Another issue, is when the current social worker leaves and there's quite a big gap between the old social worker leaving and new one taking over. So in the meantime they don't have anyone to talk to – they are told to just call the duty line but it's not really appropriate for young person with a problem to do that.
Volunteer Coordinator 3

My social worker in nine months visited me only three times.
Boy mentee, Yorkshire and Humberside

The support provided by volunteers sometimes caused conflict with social workers.

I actually had a little disagreement with his social worker at one point. She called me... and she was saying that ...I am taking over too much and should just back off. And I said well, "my mentee wants me to help him and that's what he said and all that matters is what he wants. What he wants, and that his aims are being met. Rather than him sitting there and no-one is doing anything for him.
Mentor, Yorkshire and Humberside

One young girl experienced a lot of difficulties with her keyworker, and did not feel confident to complain.²³ However, with the assistance of her befriender, she was able to deal with the issue and reduce her feelings of powerlessness.

I've actually written a ... formal letter with observations to [London borough], just because it got to the point where [befriender] had to go to hospital recently and you know her keyworker didn't know about it, because whenever they go to meet each other, ... she gets [befriender] to meet her at the bus stop and if the bus arrives before [befriender] gets there she'll go home. She won't talk to her. And like, she cancels meetings all the time ... and she asked her to sign for dates that they didn't see it other. It's not good at all.
Befriender, Greater London

²³ A keyworker is someone who provides practical support to looked after young people living independently; the key worker's role is to work with the young person and their social worker to ensure the success of the placement.

I have a keyworker, ... she is not coming on time and she is not helping me and [mentor] she know that and I told her ... sometime she made the appointment and she just didn't come and she [befriender] she write the manager last time ... and after that the keyworker she was improved for one month and after that she became the same thing like before
Girl befriender, Greater London

What was apparent was that volunteers performed an additional supporting role in young people's lives that social workers could not. However, it is recognised that the remit of social workers is somewhat different to volunteers and there is clearly an issue of time constraints with statutory children's services. In some instances, positive linkages were made and social workers expressed appreciation at the work SMILE volunteers were doing and found it beneficial for the young person and their own role. Volunteers played a role that was absent in young peoples lives and not within the remit of social workers, being able to dedicate themselves to one particular young person allowing them to feel that they are the sole focus of attention and building up a trusting relationship through regular weekly contact.

[his social worker] said she thought that it was really nice that I was working with [young person] and that he used to...um...just turn up at her office, just for, like, no reason, just because he wanted, like .. just because he feels, like, a bit needy sometimes or he just wanted to have a chat or just, like, to talk to somebody... and she said he hasn't done that since I have been meeting with him.
Befriender, Yorkshire and Humberside

3.4.10 Recreational activities

Young people were also aided to access recreational activities, alleviating boredom and isolation and increasing their social networks. Considering the complex lives of many refugee children, the importance of having fun should not be downplayed. Through engaging young people in social activities, volunteers also allowed young people the opportunity to have fun and remember they are children, first and foremost.

I think the best thing for me that came out of it was that [he] always went on about cricket ... and I got in contact with a local cricket club, [...] then, a couple of weeks later, the coach actually contacted me and said we've been so impressed by him that we'll find a way, basically, to get him registered to play competitively next year
Mentor, West Midlands

I guess the biggest complete achievement is helping her with her English and her English has got so much better since I first met her. ... I think other stuff is a bit less concrete, like the befriending side of it is, we've had fun ... part of what's been important I think is just occasionally being able to say well 'lets go to the cinema', 'let's do something nice'. We went to the fireworks you know, the Christmas market, just so that she is doing kind of normal social things which otherwise she wouldn't have an opportunity to do.
Befriender, West Midlands

If it wasn't for [befriender] we never go to Stratford on Avon, we never see Shakespeare's house or aquarium. So it is just a new experience and we never do the things that we do with [befriender].
Girl befriender, West Midlands

3.5 Benefits to volunteers

Evidence of the reciprocity of the SMILE relationships is given by the fact that all 17 volunteers interviewed also stated that they had benefited from their work with SMILE, through gaining new skills. One of the most frequent responses was that volunteers felt they had had the opportunity to learn more about young people's experiences, therefore widening their knowledge of other cultures and experiences.

It has definitely opened my eyes to some of the things.. you know I was always kind of aware that there were problems that asylum seekers faced when they came here, but I have learnt a lot more about just the little things, and how difficult they can sometimes be for someone. And that's sort of made me think that, yeah, I want to carry on being involved or supporting organisations like the Refugee Council in some capacity.

Befriender, West Midlands

I think this is probably the most beneficial volunteering I've ever done, I would recommend it to anyone because ... you really feel like you've done something really worthwhile. I think refugee children ... are a group of people that would really benefit so much from having someone investing some time in them, I think it's just the most amazing project.

Befriender, Yorkshire and Humberside

I have never worked with refugees before, and this has learned me that much that I was thinking that when I am gone back to [name of country] in February I will certainly take contact to the Refugee Council in [name of country] and maybe do some kind of work like this. So in that way I think it has been a good thing for me as well, because you get a completely another impression of the problems people like [befriender] as a refugee are struggling with when you are talking to somebody...

Befriender, Greater London

Other, more tangible skills were also mentioned as benefits gained by volunteers, such as more knowledge about the education and social care system, the ability to work with vulnerable young people, communication skills and time management. Three of the volunteers interviewed even stated that their experiences with SMILE had helped them get a new job.

I think, yeah, just my knowledge of being a young person living in London without that kind of family support, you know, EMA and things like that, ... I had no idea how any of that worked and as a result of that I now work with quite a lot of sort of disadvantaged young people, so my sort of general background knowledge is a lot more sound than it was. ... I have learnt so much it has been ridiculous! I didn't expect that. ²⁴

Befriender, Greater London

[Volunteering with SMILE] probably helped me to get the job that I got.

Mentor, Yorkshire and Humberside

I am working for [name of children's charity] now – that's directly related to doing this kind of volunteering, like, you know, I am pretty confident I wouldn't have got that job unless I had done [SMILE], actually. Or I know, actually, that to be the case.

Befriender, Greater London

All volunteers interviewed said they would like to mentor a refugee child again in the future, because they had enjoyed the experience and found it to be rewarding, as well as feeling that they had been able to help the young person they worked with. Clearly, feeling that their input had been beneficial and that the project was viable and worked was an important part of volunteers' commitment and their desire to volunteer again shows that it was a valuable experience for them.

It was just very rewarding. It is a very rewarding experience.

Mentor, Yorkshire and Humberside

²⁴ EMA refers to Education Maintenance Allowance: an allowance of up to £30 a week to encourage young people in lower income households to stay on at school or college.

Case Study: Mentoring

This case study of a mentoring relationship is evidence of a particularly close relationship that developed between the young person and his mentor. As well as highlighting the huge amount of support the young person gained from his mentor during a very difficult time and some of the very distressing experiences many young people face, it also highlights the reciprocal nature of the relationships.

Marie, a volunteer, writes about her experiences mentoring M, a young boy from Afghanistan :

I still recall that first meeting with M, he was a timid, anxious and nervous young boy. He only knew a few words of English, so we started out working with an interpreter. Not long after I started working with him, he was detained. This angered and saddened me and I felt entirely helpless. I rang him and texted him several times a week but was never able to speak to him. Through the intervention of the Children's Panel, he was released but tagged as if a criminal, given a curfew of 19.00 hours every night.

Due to his age being disputed, he was housed with other age-disputed asylum seekers and older males in shared NASS adult accommodation, which was inappropriate not to say unacceptable with leaking pipes in the bathroom, a broken cooker with mouldy growths, and more. He was left to his own devices and struggled to feed himself as he did not know how to cook. The situation in this house was so bad that I complained and he was moved to another house and the original house was closed down.

Education wise, it took five months before I was finally able to arrange an ESOL assessment for M at the local college. He never did get to college and the schools would not consider him because he was classed as an adult. Instead, we would go to the cinema, the library, shopped for warm clothes, I taught him the alphabet and found him English lessons with a local charity. He would occasionally tell me that I was like his mum as he felt he could talk to me and told me everything.

Eventually his age was reassessed as 15 by a different local authority. It felt so positive. But a few days later social services had still not moved him out of adult accommodation. Following a serious complaint, they eventually moved him to a children's home. That same afternoon, my partner and I applied to become his carers through the Family & Friends Scheme. After three long months of discussions refusals and let downs, Social services finally listened to M, who had repeatedly said he wished to live with me, and agreed he could come and live with us. I cried.

When M moved in, life changed overnight. Initially, there were a few misunderstandings as well as the issue of him getting to know my partner and at times I felt totally overwhelmed. He also started school for the first time which was a very daunting experience, but all he ever wanted was a bus pass, British friends and to go to school. Now, ten weeks on life has settled down, M is doing well at school, has many British friends and has started playing rugby. His self esteem is growing and he is more confident, jokes freely and is able to smile. He talks about the family that he misses so much. He now has aspirations of going to college and then university. He wants to be a solicitor, a teacher or an interpreter, but never a social worker!

M has been on a long journey but now the journey has turned a corner, which hopefully will have a happy ending. We can only hope, as he is still awaiting an outcome on his asylum claim. But I know one thing, fighting to become his carer was the right decision. As a result of joining him on his journey, he has changed my life and I have changed his. Throughout all this, I have worked alongside a fantastic interpreter, as well as the Volunteer Coordinator and manager of the SMILE Project. In the most difficult moments, they played such a big part with advice, patience and support. As a SMILE volunteer you can literally transform a young person's life. It's such an empowering project that really has made a lasting difference.

3.6 Extending Relationships

The majority of volunteers interviewed actually extended the period of assistance from the original scheduled three months for mentoring and one year for befriending. The reasons for extension were that volunteers and young people felt they still had a need of support, which was agreed with the Volunteer Coordinator. In the case of mentoring owing to the significant barriers in finding educational placements, this was often extended to more than three months, which was found to be quite an unrealistic timeframe to access education. Difficulties in accessing education will be discussed in next chapter.

I met with [the Volunteer Coordinator] and what happened was a discussion as to whether or not I would like to continue with it, because I think that the mentoring was originally for three months, and I think that we realised it did need to continue because she had started school and I think there was the worry there that she might need someone for when she actually starts ... just to help her settle in.
Befriender (started as mentor), West Midlands

After the three months we, he didn't have a place at the college sorted so [Volunteer Coordinator], me, and [mentee] talked about whether we should carry on and because we had some meetings and inductions coming up we decided it made sense to carry on for at least a month.
Mentor, Greater London

I think also when you get to know someone it is quite hard to detach yourself from that person so... I think, I felt that I hadn't done enough with him then and so I needed that extra time to do some things with him ... he was already in college before the end, it was just getting to spend more time with him and getting to know him and for him to have someone to talk to. I felt that I needed to.
Mentor, Yorkshire and Humberside

3.7 Difficulties and disappointments

As mentioned above, the young person who did not wish to recommend the project had been disappointed by feeling let down by her mentor. Such issues highlight the need to be realistic about what can or cannot be achieved through the project and not to over-promise on what can be delivered. The majority of young people did not have complaints about the project, a few stated they would like more outings with other young people and some said they would have liked to see their volunteer more than once a week, but generally all said there was nothing they did not enjoy.

Whilst overall the responses to the SMILE project were overwhelmingly positive from both young people and volunteers, there were some areas of contention, as is unavoidable when dealing with human relationships. Where any frustrations arose, it was generally where volunteers and young people's views on what was best for them differed, with volunteers hoping to change an aspect of the young person's life that the young person did not necessarily view as a problem. Such issues highlight that these relationships are negotiation and that objectives should be young-people led as much as possible.

The only area where...I think I would liked to have influenced him, but I don't think he wanted much help was, where he lives is a hostel and he has to cater for himself and his diet is appalling ... and personally, I would have liked to maybe influence him maybe cook for himself, maybe cook more healthy food...
Mentor, Yorkshire and Humberside

She told me that I can help with cooking, but I didn't accept thatbecause I cannot do it I cannot cook...I told her I don't like to cook.
Boy mentee, Yorkshire and Humberside

Case study: M.J.

M is an 18 year old boy from Iran in the care of Social services. He had been attending an ESOL class at college for a number of weeks. One morning he was stopped at reception and his college ID was taken off him and he was asked to leave. The college were under the impression that M was no longer eligible to attend college due to his immigration status.

The SMILE Project got in touch with the college and drew their attention to the Agency Funding Guidance 2010-2011 that confirmed that M was entitled to Home funding status (i.e. no fees to pay as he is aged under nineteen).²⁵ He was allowed to rejoin the college.

3.7.1 External difficulties

Some of the young people in SMILE are particularly vulnerable and often have suffered substantial trauma, such that befriending could only alleviate some of the pain. However, through time and their continued presence, volunteers were able in some small way to assist young people in dealing with these issues. As these quotes taken at different points in one befriending relationship show, over time young people dealt with their sadness at the loss they had experienced and the support of the volunteer was instrumental in this.

The project is good, but generally I am not happy and that affect me because my family is not here. I am alone. I can't enjoy it.

Boy befriender, Greater London – half-way befriending interview

In the beginning he was repeating always 'I don't have any family, I don't have any country, I don't have any passport, I don't have any future, I don't have anything in this world.' But he doesn't say that anymore.

Befriender, Greater London – end of befriending interview

Volunteers also noted how there were certain areas of young people lives they were unable to address, particularly the insecurity young people faced in relation to their asylum claim and the possibility of being sent back to their country of origin upon reaching 18 years of age.²⁵ Whilst this did not impact upon the relationships as young people understood it was something outside the power of volunteers, it did cause underlying concern to volunteers. However, focusing on what they could help with enabled volunteers to better deal with this difficult issue.

... the main one, the asylum application is not within our power but that is the only downside. ... I feel helpless, you see, because I don't have the power to have an impact on his asylum claim. But in a way I feel, because I have put him in education and even the social activities, I managed to find a gym for him ... I think it help him a lot to get the stress down, because when he is stressed he can go to the gym.

Befriender, Yorkshire and Humberside

The insecurity about his future is still there, he doesn't know what is going to happen to him, but I think that he has developed in a way. He is less insecure now. ... I asked him how he was now about the anxiety and was he able to sleep ... he said ... it didn't fill that much of his thought anymore that he could think about other things ... that he didn't care so much.

Befriender, Greater London

²⁵ Agency Funding Guidance 2010-2011: Learner Eligibility Guidance (YPLA, 2010) available at: <http://www.ypla.gov.uk/publications/latest/Detail.htm?id=5a677d38-5acd-4cb2-94af-223d87eaf52a>

²⁶ If they are not granted asylum, young people may be given discretionary leave to remain in the UK for a period of three years or until they are 17 and a half years old, whichever is the shorter period, when their case may be reviewed upon application.

Case Study: O.B.

O.B. was a 15 year old from Morocco. He was attending the Refugee Council English classes on a regular basis and had a good level of English and was considered bright and able, despite having had little previous formal education.

The SMILE Project did lots of work supporting O and his Foster Carer to try and access a mainstream school place in Year 10. However, after numerous meetings, Social services felt that it would be more appropriate to place O in education other than at school (eotas) provision which focuses “on young people who are struggling at school, have been excluded from school, are in care, in trouble with the law or are newly arrived asylum seekers or refugees.” O absconded before a place was offered; frustrated at a lack of education and feeling that he was wasting his life.

3.7.2 Timing

All young people and volunteers interviewed were happy with the frequency and location of their meetings. However, some young people expressed a preference for meeting volunteers during the day rather than evenings, which as many volunteers worked full time was not always possible. Some young people also felt constrained by timing when volunteers failed to keep to commitments.

When she had the time really she was very good, but the problem about her time, she has no time... you know this problem this voluntary they have their work, the time is very limited for them. They have no free time...

Mother of girl befriender, West Midlands

I found it hard if I'm honest because ... it's just hard to commit to these things when you work full time.

Mentor, West Midlands

3.8 Ending relationships

Ending relationships, particularly befriending relationships that have existed over a long period of time with weekly commitments is a difficult process. Volunteers received training from Volunteer Coordinators in how best to approach this potentially difficult time. Good practice promoted by the SMILE project is to gradually withdraw support and focus with the young person on what they have achieved through the project, thus focusing on progress and positives rather than the relationship no longer being there. Volunteer Coordinators were also available to provide extra support, where needed, in order to assist volunteers and young people.

Some pairs experienced difficulties upon ending, but these were the exception and appeared to occur when volunteers failed to give sufficient notice to the young person that the relationship was coming to an end or with particularly vulnerable young people with high needs.

It finished quite negative because he just disappeared and his attitude changed when I said our relationship is gonna end. So he started changing in a negative way. But I don't know whether it was because our relationship was towards the end or it because his case was disputed.

Mentor, Yorkshire and Humberside

Dependency was a concern of some volunteers, mainly for those working with particularly vulnerable young people. However, most volunteers felt able to deal with this and address it, with the assistance of the Volunteer Coordinator if need be. Many refugee children have experienced loss in their lives, and for

their well-being it is essential to try and alleviate feelings of abandonment when relationships come to their scheduled end.

I think he became very dependent on me which is a bit of worry and so I hope the fact that I stopped volunteering with him hasn't had such a negative impact on him that it sort of overshadows the positive influence I had during those four months ... I think very positive those four months, and I hope he can oversee the fact that it had to end.

Mentor, Greater London

However, the majority ended well. Volunteers had prepared young people and discussed in advance that the relationship was ending, so young people accepted the ending.

I feel quite sad when I realised it was going to end and things were really good when she was helping but now I feel confident to continue doing what I am doing.

Boy befriender, Yorkshire and Humberside

Several volunteers interviewed stated they wished to continue to keep in contact with the young person they had been working with, as did many young people, particularly in befriending relationships, evidence of the strong bond that developed between volunteers and young people.

I plan to ... maybe not stop entirely because I got quite attached to the family... so I would keep in touch definitely even if it is just sort of the odd email just to check that they are doing ok in school or whatever.

Befriender, West Midlands

I talk to him on the phone because I would like to maintain some kind of relationship, sorry, friendship, outside, after.

Befriender, Yorkshire and Humberside

I don't see an end. Even if I am not a volunteer anymore I will still send a text. ... because I feel the need to look out for them.

Befriender, Yorkshire and Humberside

... we are in contact, but because I am in college I am very busy. ... I want to be in contact with her [in future] because I believe she is really nice and I like her.

Boy befriender, Greater London

Befrienders who had supported children in families often developed relationships with the families as well, particularly as they would visit in the family home. Both families and volunteers saw these relationships as friendships that had extended beyond the boundaries of the SMILE project.

I think because you don't start to see it as the SMILE project, you just start to see it as you know you going round to see a family that you get on with and you know you share stories with and you share experiences with so perhaps I don't see it in the same way as when I started out, ... we get on well and enjoy learning from each other, I suppose. Yeah, so it's just like you go on there and you befriend, but then sometimes you also become actual friends, you know. I wouldn't say I am friends with a 12 year old girl, but with her family, they are very warm they are very welcoming and you just form a friendship and it kind of goes kind of beyond the initial befriending and it is more of a friendship.

Befriender, West Midlands

One time, [my daughter] invited [befriender] for dinner and afterwards she come here and have a dinner with us and she is really like Iranian food, in particular rice, because rice is different shape, and a few days ago she had a party with her workmate and she cooked the Iranian food for them.

Father of befriender girl, West Midlands

It has kind of evolved from that original mentoring to befriending. Not with just her but with the family as well, which is really nice. So, I think to be honest when the SMILE project finishes ... I'll probably still see them because we have developed quite a nice friendship.

Befriender, West Midlands

We have become good friends; you know mum and dad will come to me with their problems.

Befriender, Yorkshire and Humberside

3.9 Value of Project

As evidenced above, it was clear from interviews with both young people and volunteers that both parties in the relationship pairs felt they had gained from the project, and that it was a valuable experience for them in multiple ways. At the close of the interview, many interviewees also spontaneously expressed the value they saw in the project and how positive it had been for them.

I feel good, the programme is nice. I like, is good. If someone who doesn't have support or like that, if they help us it's good. The SMILE project is nice. Like you feel you can have, you have someone to share idea and you have someone to help you.

Girl befriender, Greater London

I will say thank you to the Refugee Council and SMILE project I am so grateful because it is very difficult and very helpful for my daughter and also for people look like us and when we came here we were in very huge situation and about education, about accommodation, about support, anything and Refugee Council was very helpful to us and I can say thank you. Thanks a lot.

Father of girl befriender, West Midlands

... it's shame that it is coming to an end, really. ... because I think from my perspective I think it has been really, really valuable for both me as a volunteer, but also for [befriender]. So it is just a shame that it can't continue, and I just hope that something else will be there to step in and take its place.

Befriender, West Midlands

3.10 Summary

The overall positive impact of the SMILE relationships on both young people and volunteers is testimony to the success of the project in meeting its aspirations. Findings evidence the need for such a project to fill the gap in refugee children's lives when they are forced to seek asylum in another country, many isolated from friends and family. The support young people received from volunteers has been invaluable and volunteers have had a significant positive impact on young people's wellbeing in many different ways. Findings show that SMILE meets the needs of refugee young people in increasing their resilience and ability to enjoy and achieve. However, findings also highlight the mutually beneficial nature of the relationships that developed as volunteers also expressed how much they themselves have gained from the SMILE project.

4. Educational barriers

Despite the successes of volunteers in the SMILE project in aiding young people to access education, evidence from the research findings show that there are still many barriers to refugee and asylum-seeking young people gaining education places. The fact that during the course of the research two young people were forced to take a local authority to court over its failure to provide them with an appropriate educational placement is stark evidence of the many discriminatory practices refugee and asylum-seeking young people are still facing. Sadly, it suggests that much work needs to be done in this area to ensure these young people are able to access the education they are entitled to.

Prior to joining SMILE, young people interviewed had been out of education for periods of time ranging from a few weeks to over two years. The reasons behind their lack of education included having recently moved to the area, being too depressed to think about attending college due to their forced migration experiences, and just generally being overwhelmed by the new social landscape.

A lot of work was done helping the mentee come to terms with the loss of his family and trying to get him into a position to think positively about his future and education.

Mentor, Greater London

At that time I had a lot of problems ... I didn't know about any, like how it works, the education in this country and what to do.

Boy befriender, Greater London

Both separated young people and children in families also faced difficulties in navigating the English education system.

Like I said [befriender1] didn't have anyone, he didn't have anybody to show him look, this is the college. So the simplest thing you see, so I need to take him to college to fill out an application form. They didn't have that. They didn't even know where college was. Like [befriender2] for example, in Sheffield, I had to look on internet to find for a place for college doing ESOL..²⁶ Then I take him there. I travelled there because he didn't know where to go. So I went with him.

Befriender (supporting two young people), Yorkshire and Humberside

I didn't know how I could register [my daughter] and enrol her into the school, and how could I find the school and [befriender] was very useful for us to and she arranged the interview with the Head teacher at the school and [my daughter] went there, [befriender] got the uniform for first school. It was very useful.

Father of befriender girl (started as mentee), West Midlands

The Volunteer Coordinator in London also noted how his expertise was called upon outside of the SMILE project owing to the large numbers of young people coming to the Refugee Council in need of an educational placement. Holding the dual role of SMILE Volunteer Coordinator and Youth Activities Worker meant this Volunteer Coordinator was located in the Children's Section in London and had a high level of liaison with colleagues, who referred young people in need of education to him. Again, this is clear evidence of the gap in provision for young people in this area, the difficulties this group of young people are faced with and highlights the need for projects such as SMILE to assist in this area.

I get a lot of people referred to me who can't be matched to a mentor for whatever reason, because we haven't got enough mentors or whatever, and I do tend to do just a bit of work on my own, kind of thing, like education advice, that kind of thing.

Volunteer Coordinator, London

²⁶ English for speakers of other languages (ESOL).



Age dispute was also a problem for a significant amount of young people, who were unable to attend school or college until their age dispute had been resolved. As age dispute can have such a significant impact on young people's wellbeing, it will be discussed in a separate section.

Being without education is detrimental to refugee young people, particularly in relation to personal development and mental wellbeing leaving them isolated and reducing their chances of integration. SMILE young people found having no education extremely frustrating; they felt isolated, left out and bored.

All the time stay home. And when I live the children's home I feel very, very bad because I can't speak with another people, I can't speak English. ... I feel very sad and all the time I stay my room and I am going to cry... I no going to college, school nothing, anything so 24 hour I live the [children's] home, everybody going to his school but I am not going.

Girl befriender (started as mentee), West Midlands

4.1 Waiting times to access educational placement

As discussed previously, evidence from previous research shows that refugee children often face lengthy waits to access education and can spend long periods of time without access to appropriate education (for example Refugee Council, 2005; Doyle & McCorrison, 2008; Brownlees and Finch, 2010). Findings from SMILE highlight that unfortunately this is still a significant problem.

Upon completion of their role, volunteers are asked to fill in an output form, detailing what they achieved with their mentee or befriender. Data was collected from 25 mentor's forms, which highlighted the time taken to access educational placement and some of the difficulties encountered. The time taken for young people to access education ranged from two weeks to 15 months. Four of these places were in school, the rest were college placements as the majority of SMILE young people are of college age, or assessed as such.

Timescales to access school places were quicker than college places, between two weeks to one month. College placements took longer as places fill up very quickly, and anyone trying to apply after the start of the first term generally has to wait until the start of the next academic year. This problem was widespread across the three regions.

... at the time I met [befriender] it was in the middle, I think it was too late, so most of the colleges were full they didn't have any space for him. But then at the end we managed to find a community centre offering ESOL classes three times a week.

Befriender, Yorkshire and Humberside

It was supposed to be three months but I faced problems to find a proper place in college and it extend to eight months ... because when I started to contact [my mentor] it was winter and college had started already so I had to wait until the next college available.

Boy mentee, Greater London

Since November, places haven't been available in college and it's getting progressively harder. Colleges are full, have waiting lists. Some have 300 people on their waiting list. We are just being told people have to reapply in September.

Volunteer Coordinator 1

We struggled, I struggled immensely because there was very little services and what services there were, because of his age - he was originally an age disputed case, and then social services said he was 17 eventually; kind of 16 and half, 17, which meant that he was more college age. So that kind of restricted it even more, and then because it was mid-year there wasn't many places he could get access to. And where we did find particular classes they were limited to like two hours or more for people with advanced English or people who lived in that particular area. So there were all those kind of barriers that we came across.

Mentor, Yorkshire and Humberside

Young people of college age awaiting a placement can access ESOL classes, but these are often adult classes and young people would much prefer to study with their peers. Classes may also only be for a couple of hours a week and quality varies greatly. The homework club in Leeds, and then later Birmingham, was set up to provide a source of alternative provision for young people while they were waiting to find places in mainstream education.

The main reason the homework club was set up in Leeds was to capture the people who are still waiting for places. Some young people did attend ESOL classes for adults a few hours a week – but they tend to much prefer being with young people and therefore gave up these classes when homework club established.

Volunteer Coordinator, Yorkshire and Humberside

In London, the Volunteer Coordinator noted that school places were also a problem for SMILE young people when applying after the start of term.

After the academic year starts, people find it difficult. Even a month before the school year starts they are told no spaces. One young person has been waiting ... [8 months] and still not got a school place. ... Children out of school are doing nothing, very rarely local authority will supply something for them, for example children in [London borough] were given a language course but it was a short three month kind of thing. I am always trying to get local authorities to provide something, they should provide an alternative, but rarely do.

Volunteer Coordinator, Greater London

This was not the case in the West Midlands, where the main issue young people faced was having to travel long distances to get to school, as they were actually able to access places, but these were in schools some distance from their homes. In Yorkshire and Humberside the majority of young people supported in mentoring relationships were of college age, so the issue did not arise.

Generally, there are usually school places available, they just might be far from young people. There is one of our clients who has like a two hour journey to school in the morning, he is only 11, he has to get a bus into town and a bus out of town and with the sort of walking and waiting for buses it's about two hours there, two hours back.

Volunteer Coordinator, West Midlands

4.2 Confusion over educational entitlements

Despite guidance issued explaining rights and entitlements of children who are seeking asylum or are refugees to further education, it appears this is not always implemented and there is some confusion over correct procedures, which then impacts upon the young person's access to education.

All asylum seekers aged 16 to 18 are eligible for fee remission as home students in further education.²⁸ The Young Peoples Learning Agency (YPLA) has confirmed that it 'would expect local authorities to try to find the learner a place at a funded provider. [The YPLA] would also expect our providers not to attempt to charge exam fees for 16-18 year old refugees.' (Refugee Council, 2010). Whilst it is acknowledged that regulations regarding course fees for further education can be complex, evidence from the research highlights that this confusion can have a negative impact upon young people's access to college.

I have spoken to so many different colleges now and they don't seem to know what their policy is on providing free education to asylum seekers under 18 and they don't get back to you when they say they're going to...

Mentor, Greater London

Financial difficulties can also prevent young people from accessing further education post-16 and financial support is not always available, as this is dependent on a young person's immigration status. Funding in the form of an Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA), providing an allowance of up to £30 a week to encourage young people in lower income households to stay on at school or college was available during the SMILE project. However, EMA is only available to children with refugee status, indefinite leave to remain or humanitarian protection. Those with discretionary leave to remain, or who are asylum seekers were not eligible. Further, due to changes in education funding, EMA will be discontinued from January 2011.²⁹ Findings from the research would suggest some confusion exists over young people's entitlement to this support.

EMA – section 20 young people with leave to remain can't get it. ... Some young people are definitely entitled to it but local authorities are still not giving it.

Volunteer Coordinator 2

Colleges have been confused about fee remission and entitlements to Education Maintenance Allowance, and have tried to charge overseas rates to young people.

Volunteer Coordinator 3

As the school leaving age will be raised to 17 by 2013 and 18 by 2015, refugee young people are likely to be further affected by cuts in learner support funds.

4.3 Admissions policies

Aside from the complexity of the English education system, which young people and families found difficult to navigate alone, local authority admissions policies were found to be impacting detrimentally on young people. One of the findings was inconsistency in policy and practice, which led to confusion over finding places.

[it] seems to depend a lot on luck. No consistent strategy. Local authority might tell you all the schools are full, just waiting lists. Doesn't seem to be any consistency or good quality information about where there is definitely a space.

Volunteer Coordinator 3

²⁸ See The Children's Legal Centre (2009:45-47) for further information.

²⁹ From January 2011 EMA will be discontinued, the coalition government has stated that learner support funds will be available, however at the time of writing (Dec. 2010) had not specified further on what such funding would constitute. For further information see: (<http://www.direct.gov.uk/en/EducationAndLearning/14To19/MoneyToLearn/EMA/index.htm>).

Evidence from SMILE has shown that in some instances, local authorities are choosing to send young people, and particularly those in Years 10 and 11, to alternative educational provision, outside mainstream schooling. The reasoning for such decisions were generally because of the young person's limited English language skills or lack of knowledge of the UK educational system, or in some cases due to no prior education. In some cases this can be beneficial for young people, enabling them to access intensive English classes and improve their English before moving into mainstream education. However, in one case, a young person was referred to a pupil referral unit (PRU), set up for the provision of education to pupils with behavioural problems or who have difficulties engaging with education.

Participants in SMILE workshops held during the research seminar in February 2010 also noted that PRUs were never an acceptable option for young people and that a personalised approach should be taken when addressing young people's educational needs and when considering alternative provision, outside the mainstream classroom.³⁰ The advantages and disadvantages of placing refugee children in education which is often segregated from their British peers need to be debated on a case by case basis and should be in line with existing guidance and legislation in this area.³¹

There was also evidence of good practice where local authorities responded to the need for additional education for those refugee and asylum seeking young people who had been unable to access an educational placement.

[Name of local authority] generally seem to be pretty good in my experience. Do their best to get young people into education and do have things in the interim as well. There is a place called [name of college] which lot of young people go to while they are waiting for mainstream school/ college which is ESOL intensive.

Volunteer Coordinator 1

[Name of local authority] have some alternative provision for school age children – this is in the school grounds so the young people do get to mix with other children at break times etc. ... [Name of local authority] also have a really good system, for further education, they have like a holding class that runs all year so even if there are no places they still manage to get them into college and give them ESOL for a few days a week while they are waiting for something. ... [they] are really flexible and opportunistic – which is how you have to be with ESOL stuff because people are coming in all the time. I think in terms of good practice I would definitely highlight this college. It has a very flexible approach. Also, people might leave, that what's happens a lot of people move on or get dispersed and as places become available they move new people in.

Volunteer Coordinator 2

4.4 Discrimination in admissions policies

An unfortunate example of the difficulties and discrimination that many refugee children face in accessing education is evidenced by the fact that two young people supported by SMILE were forced to take a Greater London local authority to court in order to ensure their access to appropriate education. Through the support of SMILE, it came to light that a school in London was interviewing young people as a method of deciding whether a child should be offered a place at a school. This is in direct contradiction with Section 88A of the School Standards and Framework Act 1988 (as inserted by the Education and Inspections Act 2006). The school then refused to accept the young people on the basis of effectively choosing to not accept the local authority social worker's assessment of age.

³⁰ Participants at the seminars included social workers, foster carers, local authority employees and educational professionals. Further information on SMILE research seminars and workshops can be found at: www.refugeecouncil.org.uk

³¹ See section 1.2.4 above.

Despite social workers pointing out that the Home Office had already granted one young person his legal status in the UK, and that therefore completing an age assessment would not be appropriate, the school chose to ignore this advice and requested an assessment. In the case of another young person, they even went so far as to question the validity of his asylum claim. After further investigation it emerged approximately 40 young people had been refused places on the same grounds and refusal letters stating as such had been sent to the local authority in question, the London Borough of Croydon.

With the support of SMILE, two separated boys from Afghanistan raised a legal challenge against the local authority. The boys had been without appropriate education for nearly a year, and the local authority had placed them in an adult language college that runs a six week programme of classes in the morning. Following judicial review, the judge ruled in favour of the young people finding that the council had failed in its statutory duty to find them places in mainstream schools.³² As looked after children, both should have been accorded the highest priority when it came to finding them schools, but the local authority was found to have not assessed their individual needs, nor found them places.³³ The judge presiding over the case ordered the council to provide suitable education, stating: “At the heart of this case there are two children who are not in education. It is... a lamentable failure by the local educational authority.”³⁴

This is an example of the discriminatory practices that refugee children regularly face in accessing education. Such practices confirm previous research findings that show how the subjective nature of the age assessment process can influence perceptions of asylum seekers and their access to services (Carlile, forthcoming). The difficulties this causes will be discussed further below.

4.5 Age disputes

A significant number of young people involved in SMILE have been age disputed at some point. At the end of the data collection phase, approximately a third of all young people in Greater London and the West Midlands have been age disputed, with the figure in Yorkshire and Humberside reaching over half.³⁵ At present, no statutory procedure or guidance has been issued to local authorities on how to conduct an age assessment. Age assessments are an inexact science and challenges to local authority decisions are common (Children’s Legal Centre, 2009). Further, lack of guidance and differences in quality of practice (see for example Crawley, 2007) can lead to young people going through numerous assessments, with different outcomes, causing them further confusion and distress.

[name of young person] was out of education for about 15 months. This was because he had led a life as a child in another city as he was originally assessed at 15 The same local authority then re-assessed him as 18 despite very little differing evidence. He was then moved into NASS accommodation in [name of city he was moved to]. He didn’t want to go to college as he thought it would be too adult for him ... I eventually persuaded him to enrol but he only agreed just after college courses had started at the beginning of September 2009. All places were full but I got him on a waiting list for college (ESOL). He got a place at the end of October and studied all year. He has now just started GCSE maths and English at the same college as the court recently found him to be under 18.

Volunteer Coordinator 1

³² R (on the application of KS) v CROYDON LONDON BOROUGH COUNCIL (2010).

³³ See http://www.google.com/hostednews/ukpress/article/ALeqM5j31onsK-qa3TjNV2Ch26q5_8Mhng?docId=N0004561287590243833A for further information

³⁴ Judge Keith Lindblom cited in Croydon Today, 25th October, 2010 <http://www.thisiscroydontoday.co.uk/news/Council-failed-war-torn-teens/article-2785489-detail/article.html>

³⁵ These figures are taken from totals of all children involved in SMILE, and therefore include a few primary aged children who are less likely to be age disputed (approximately 20 per cent of children in West Midlands, 17 per cent in London and 16 per cent in Yorkshire & Humberside were of primary school age).

Before, you know, sometime my social worker say you are over 18, I go to NASS house and then he say no you are 15 then I back to children home. Now at the moment I stay NASS house, but now is final decision 'yeah you are 16 and a half'. Now I back to children's home again ... I was very angry you know. Sometime is like funny because, you know, yeah, is funny, you know why – because I telling about my age but the home office, not home office, my social worker says don't believe you and so ... when I live in children home, I going with my link worker to the dentist, she gonna check my teeth, she say 'yeah, you are 16', no, no at this time I am 15, and she say 'yeah, you are 15', and then after few months I going with my social worker and same doctor she is giving report, I am 18. funny innit? ... I don't know why same doctor three months ago she say 'yeah you are 15 and then three months after she say you are 18 ...I don't believe in my social worker you know, she is very crazy, I don't like her... Because she don't believe in anything about my case so I don't know what's happening because at the moment got same social worker now but I don't believe she gonna help me again. I don't know.

Girl befriender, West Midlands

Aside from the practical difficulties this causes, in terms of not being allowed to access school if found to be over 18 years old or being housed in accommodation with adults, which also presents safeguarding issues, there are also emotional factors to consider. Being age disputed has wider implications in terms of young people's identity and behaviour, as they can feel that through accepting their age as that given by the Home Office or children's social services they are being forced to accept the system, or confirm that they are not the age they say they are. Thus, as research findings suggest, being age disputed can have a far reaching impact on the young people, and frame their response to services.

One young person is 14 and can be very 'precocious'. When he gets angry he speaks in an 'adult' way which means that people don't see him as being a child. He is very insistent that he doesn't want to go to college as he is 14 and feels he belongs in school and that is what should be provided for him, he is trying to fight the system and refuses to go to college as he says he needs to go to school.

Volunteer Coordinator 2

Some young people are adamant that they should not be going to college as they belong in school, and also think that by taking up a school place, they are accepting the age that they have been assessed at, and they do not wish to do so.

Volunteer Coordinator 3

He wanted to be normal because other friends of his who were age assessed more, a little bit younger than him, they were going to school. And all he wanted to do was nine o'clock to three o'clock go to school. And he would say that quite often and that was his key area, really.

Mentor, Yorkshire and Humberside

Age disputes impact upon access to education as young people can wait months for disputes to be resolved, leading to them being isolated from social interaction with other young people and negatively impacting upon their personal development and possibility to integrate. Research has shown how education can help combat refugee children's isolation and provide normality which helps them reconstruct their lives (Hek 2005). Being denied access to education for such long periods of time due to age assessments is significantly detrimental to young people's wellbeing. This issue was also raised in the SMILE workshops, where participants noted how destabilising the impact of age assessment could be on refugee young people, who are already traumatised, and hinder their educational development.

Perhaps that [being out of education] was a problem in relation to age assessment; I suffered a lot for a long time with this issue.

Boy mentee, West Midlands

Age disputes are a massive barrier – many young people have been assessed as over 16 so are unable to take up school places. This can lead to people waiting for a long time before issues are resolved or they can accept a place at a college.

Volunteer Coordinator 3

However, whilst the young people were frustrated by the system and often very angry about having their age decided for them, it appears they did not see it as the remit of the SMILE project to assist them in this area; highlighting how the project was viewed as an independent source of assistance.

The thing I really needed in my life was to be accepted for my age, but the Home Office and the social worker didn't accept my age, my real age. And I thought here they could help me but they did not do anything [but] it was not her job with help me with my age, it was somebody else.
Boy mentee, Yorkshire and Humberside

One young person has been assessed over five times. He was referred last year – 13 years old, and so now is 14 years old and appears it. So he should be at school but just been doing ESOL classes. ... he has been waiting over year and half for resolution on age dispute. He's been detained and tagged, had horrendous time ... [he is] supported by befriender ... He really trusts and listens to her and will take things on board from her. ... Age dispute hasn't affected his relationship with his befriender. It's been very beneficial for him to have this relationship...
Volunteer Coordinator 2

Clearly, having a befriender in this case was of significant assistance to this young person who was going through a very difficult time and subject to continuous assessment, even detention. This process can be very disorientating and frustrating for young people.

Such problems highlight the concerns raised in previous literature around age dispute and the negative impact upon asylum-seeking and refugee children (Hek, 2005; Crawley, 2007; Brownlees and Finch, 2010). On a recent visit to the UK, the UN Special Rapporteur on the human rights of migrants also expressed concern about age-disputed cases, stating that he “notes with dismay that [UKBA age dispute] guidance relies excessively on subjective criteria, having as a consequence the possibility that minors could be considered as adults throughout the application process and detained on this basis.”³⁶

4.6 Summary

This research has shown that the support of volunteers has been invaluable in assisting young people achieve their potential in school environment and in helping them access the education to which they are entitled. Unfortunately, the findings reveal that there are still significant structural barriers to refugee children accessing education, which were outside the control of volunteers. Whilst guidance exists to support refugee children in school setting, and good practice is evident, it seems that many education providers are not aware of this guidance. The fact that there is no statutory policy for assisting refugee children in general leaves their inclusion to the discretion of the school, and there are many inconsistencies in local authority practices.

Given the fact that being age disputed can have such a profound impact on the way that young people are supported and the services they can access, as well as their mental wellbeing, it is not surprising that this frustration will be aired when young people are asked their opinions on the help they are receiving. Findings show the subjectivity and inconsistency of the process serves only to increase young people's isolation and confusion, and can lead to them being out of education for long periods of time.

³⁶ Report from the UN Special Rapporteur on the human rights of migrants (2010:14).

5. SMILE Social Activities

As part of the project, SMILE ran social activities for refugee children. The activities provided an opportunity for young people to meet new friends and experience things that they might not otherwise be able to do, and perhaps more importantly remember they are children first and foremost and have fun.

As well as one off trips into central London and camping trips to the Lake District, SMILE helped fund and support several weekly projects, including:

Soundmix – music project (London)

Soundmix provided music and arts activities to young refugees who have recently arrived in the UK and have no family support of their own. Based in London, the project gave young people the chance to learn an instrument as well as write their own music and practice singing. The project has performed live on many occasions and released 2 CDs of music!

Social Evening (London)

Ran weekly to provide a space for young refugees and asylum seekers to relax and engage in social activities. They also had the opportunity to access support whilst there.

Young Women’s Social Evening (London)

Set up to specifically target young female refugees and asylum seekers, who felt intimidated in the male dominated social evening, the Young Women’s Social Evening focused on arts seeks to provide a safe space for young women to interact and participate in various activities on a weekly basis.

Crossworld Football Club (London)

A football club for young refugees and asylum seekers. Players trained weekly and participated in friendly and league matches.

Homework Club (in Leeds and Birmingham)

A weekly club which was set up to enable young people to have a quiet place to do homework and also gave an opportunity for those young people awaiting ESOL classes to learn some English.

SMILE Documentary Film Project (all regions)

The film project was set up to give young people a voice on their experiences; allow them to learn specific skills (e.g. filming, editing) as well as team work and negotiation skills; and to produce a series of films across the three SMILE regions.

As part of the project evaluation and in order to understand what, if any, benefits young people felt they gained from such projects, SMILE researchers carried out short interviews with young people involved in the Social Evening, the Homework Club and Crossworld Football Club. We also sent questionnaires to the organisers of these projects to gauge their views on how these projects benefit young people and what impact they could be seen to have on young people’s ability to enjoy and achieve.



5.1 Project Leaders' views

Organisers of projects noted how young people improved in confidence through the duration of the project and also appreciated opportunities to learn new skills.

The project provides a very safe and stimulating space for young girls who are generally going through quite a tough time. As well as this it provides new friends, practice in English language, new activities and experiences and above all familiar faces they feel comfortable with. I think all these elements hugely help the girls. Some of them have made new friends whom they meet up with regularly hence improving social life and skills. Some who were too shy to speak a word of English now try to communicate and are not so shy.

Young Women's' Social Evening project leader

Changes in ability to concentrate in English, maths and other classes held at Refugee Council - volunteers report this to us. Friendships made with others on course, leading to shared housing, college places, big increase in confidence, sometimes from depression and self harm slowly towards some stability, and actual music skills which seem to help express themselves.

Soundmix project leader

By the very nature of the project the more the young people attended the more confident they became. This increased in time. By the end of the projects the young people who were shy and reserved at the beginning were part of a group, confident and looked relatively happy to be where they were.

SMILE Documentary Film Project leader

5.2 Young People's Views

5.2.1 Homework Club - Leeds

SMILE, together with the Children's Society Leading Edge Initiative set up a homework club in Leeds in August 2009 to support young people aged 11 to 18 years with their schoolwork. The purposes of the homework club was also to provide a source of learning and education for those young people not in education and awaiting a place, in order that they might be able to study in the meantime.

An average of seven young people attend the homework club each week at the Refugee Council in Leeds where they were supported by a number of volunteers who assist them with their homework and English language. The Children's Society conducted an evaluation of the Homework Club in November 2009 and the SMILE research team followed up in June 2010 using the same questionnaire format. The findings are taken from both surveys and a total of 15 young people responded.

Young people attending the Homework Club were asked what they thought of the Homework Club and to give a mark out of ten, with ten being the best possible and one the worst mark. The majority gave a mark of ten (47 per cent), followed by nine (20 per cent), seven per cent gave a mark of eight and 13 per cent gave a mark of six and 13 per cent a mark of five.

What young people liked:

Young people were asked to state one thing they liked about the Homework Club. The majority liked having the opportunity to study and receive support with their homework.

I like to learn and like come homework club and help for my homework.

I like I am struggling on some of my schoolwork and I can get help by the homework club staff.

Everyone is friendly and we having lots of fun.

What they did not like:

The majority of young people said there was nothing they did not like, and two people stated the one thing they didn't like was the frequency and that they would like the homework club to happen more often:

I don't like just one day a week. I like to come two day.

Just 20 per cent of young people complained it was too noisy and one young person felt the bigger children did not let her play. Other comments included:

No difference between people who speak and don't speak English. We are all doing the same thing.

When asked what other activities they would like to do at SMILE group, the majority of young people stated they would like to do recreational activities such as football, volleyball, table tennis or games and art.

Many of the young people interviewed as mentees or befriendedees also mentioned the Homework Club as one of the things they most enjoyed about SMILE. They appreciated the opportunity to learn new skills, improve their English and meet new people in a relaxed environment. The importance of having a safe space and the desire for young people to learn and improve educationally was evident in young people's responses.

5.2.2 Crossworld Football Club – London

Crossworld Football Club worked with approximately 20 young male refugee and asylum seekers.³⁷ The young people get the opportunity to train for a competitive team for free.

A total of nine young people were interviewed for their views on the project. Their ages ranged from 15 to 19 years. All gave very positive feedback, with 25 per cent giving a mark of ten, 13 per cent a mark of 9, 37 per cent a mark of 8 and 25 per cent a mark of 7.

³⁷ There is a plan to set up an all-female team in the future.

Is a great activity because here players are from all over the world and we can come together as one.
Male, 15, Albania

I like because we are so many friend together, just like we are family together.
Male, 17, Iraq

Obviously, the main reason for wanting to join the team was to play football:

My friend recommended me. We are best friends from college and I like football. I was thinking to become professional. My friend tell me about team playing around London. Our coach is very good. They care about us.
Male, 18, Ukraine

Young people also felt they had benefited in other ways, through learning more about the UK and sharing a social space with others, thus developing their social networks and knowledge.

When I first joined it was good because we going different places in London, when we have match we use transport in group, travel together, for some people don't know London, if I go with them then I can get to know everything.
Male, 17, Eritrea

We go activity like rafting, go-karting, go on trips out London. I like that we do meeting and give idea to each other.
Male, 18, Ivory Coast

When asked if there was anything they did not like, 44 per cent responded that the training ground was too far from where they live and they would prefer somewhere closer; 22 per cent said there was nothing they would like to change; 11 per cent said they would like more support with football kit; and the remaining 23 per cent stated they would like the team to perform better in matches.

When asked if they attended any other Refugee Council activities, 55 per cent had not and 45 per cent currently did or had in the past. Specifically, young people stressed how important it had been for them, particularly on first arriving in the UK, to have a welcoming place to go and play as well as get support and advice.

I play there table tennis. Social evening is good. Now I am not going. When my first time [in country] I was going every Tuesday to play table football and getting help. When I first come UK I went every week. Now I am busy at college...
Male, 17, Eritrea

Last year I did a trip to central London. Many things, many trips, ... We enjoy ourselves, meet people and especially for when I come to the UK I was young, I didn't know what to do, that [Refugee Council] is best place, you don't know so many rules, college, everything and they help me about everything.
Male, 19, Iraq

5.2.3 Social evening – London

A total of twelve young people, all male, were interviewed on their views of the Refugee Council's Social evening, which SMILE partly funds. All gave very positive feedback, with the only complaints being that sometimes it was too noisy and there were occasional fights, and one person stated that it closed too early, he would have preferred a later end time.

Nothing I don't like. Everything is good. Somebody fighting with each other, I don't like that. I'm there playing snooker and don't like it.

Male, 16, Afghanistan

The majority, 67 per cent, joined because a friend or friends had recommended it to them, 25 per cent joined because Refugee Council staff or their social worker suggested it and eight per cent couldn't remember why they had joined. All thought it was a good opportunity for young people to have fun and to access support.

It's good for us, especially refugee people because they come from different places and different countries. We learn activities like snooker and make friends and learn how to live outside in this country. It's good to bring people all together.

Male, 17, Pakistan

I think it's a good thing for every young person as it gives information for people. Every young person when they come to this country should come to social evening as it's the best advice.

Male, 17, Iraq

When asked what they liked about it, most responded they enjoyed having the opportunity to meet new friends, play table football and learn English.

I've made lots of friends here so I've learnt lots of things. My favourite in the social evening is to play snooker and talk to people. More English. Good for my experience, talking to people and making friends. I enjoy the social evening.

Male, 17, Pakistan

All but one of the young men interviewed for the Social evening had participated in other activities at the Refugee Council, with 67 per cent having attended SMILE residential trips, which all enjoyed. Other activities included trips to the cinema, Crossworld football club, and learning music (Soundmix).

[I] went on camping trip. That was fantastic. Everything was good. Nighttime we were making fire, in the morning we were going to the beach. I really liked that.

Male, 16, Afghanistan

5.3 Summary

The social activities young people were able to participate in have had a positive impact on their wellbeing in a number of ways, and enabled them to develop skills in an informal learning environment. Through participating in fun activities young people were able to reduce the isolation and loneliness many feel, but also to develop socially and improve their language skills, which are crucial attributes to integration and can improve their life chances. SMILE enabled these young people to access activities that they might not have had the opportunity to do otherwise.

6. Raising awareness in a school setting: the SMILE experience

SMILE delivered awareness-raising sessions in primary and secondary schools across the three project regions. At the end of the data collection phase, 55 school talks had been conducted in both primary and secondary school settings.³⁸ Talks were creative and participatory and utilised an interactive approach to stimulate interest and debate. Sessions had also been held with teaching staff in one local authority. The aim of these sessions was to share information about the experiences of refugees, the circumstances under which they leave their home countries and Britain's role in refugee protection. These sessions were designed to challenge the myths about refugees and asylum seekers that often feature in the popular press and conversations about forced migration. Where possible, refugees themselves contributed to the school talks to provide a more personalised account of what life is like as a refugee.

Research has shown that bullying and racism are common problems facing refugee children, which has a negative impact on their ability to enjoy and achieve in their educational setting (See for example Rutter and Hyder, 1998; Rutter and Stanton, 2001; Doyle and McCorrison, 2008). By challenging misperceptions and informing children and young people in schools about the realities that refugees and asylum seekers face, SMILE aims to reduce instances of bullying and racism.

The SMILE team assessed the impact of the talks through analysing before and after questionnaires completed by pupils as well as questionnaires to teachers on the impact of the talks on their practice. In addition, teachers were asked to complete a feedback form three months after talks have taken place to assess the longer-term impact. Following evaluation in line with the principles of action research, it was noted that the initial questionnaire was not capturing the data the team expected. Accordingly, the research team altered the questionnaires to enable more accurate picture of the impact of the talks to be gauged.

The project team experienced some difficulties in data collection owing to logistical issues, so data does not cover all school talks that were given. Nonetheless, the data that has been collected does show an increase in knowledge of refugee issues among pupils after the talks, and indications that by having the correct information, previous negative attitudes had started to shift.

6.1 Increasing awareness: the results

6.1.2 Pupils

Data has been collected from almost 500 pupils in separate sessions across primary and secondary level from a total of ten schools.³⁹ The evidence from this data reveals an increase in more positive attitudes towards refugees and asylum seekers.

The initial questionnaire format revealed the following changes after awareness raising sessions at:

³⁸ The data was collected to end October 2010 and therefore does not reflect total numbers of school talks conducted throughout the duration of the project.

³⁹ A total of 492 questionnaires from pupils were collected.

1. A Secondary school:

Main reason asylum seekers come to the UK	Pre-session	Post-session
For benefits and housing	38%	15%
Fleeing persecution	12%	60%
To escape famine and drought	43%	17%
For work	7%	8%

2. A Primary school:

Main reason asylum seekers come to the UK	Pre-session	Post-session
For benefits and housing	17%	5%
Fleeing persecution	50%	84%
To escape famine and drought	11%	5%
For work	22%	5%

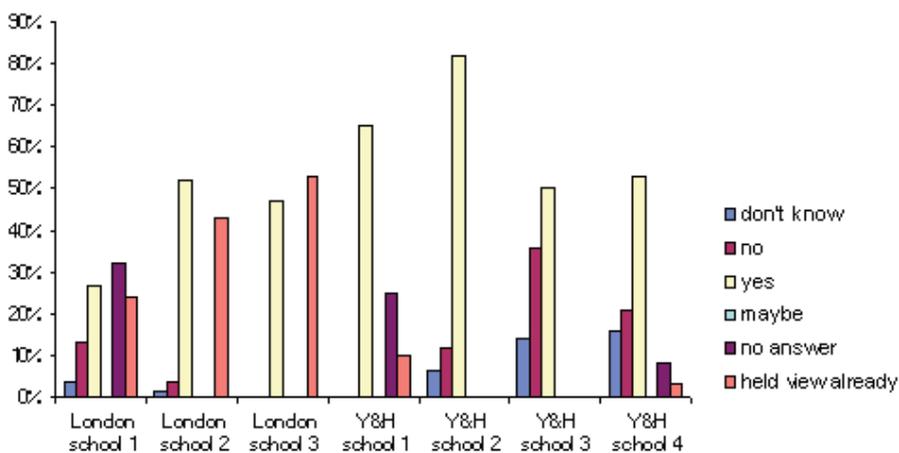
The responses from Year 9 pupils at a West Midlands school highlight the prejudices held by many school children and the need for more awareness raising to combat such stereotypes:

Before - In your own words and in one sentence, please describe what you think of asylum seekers	After - In your own words, can you tell us if the talk has changed what you think about asylum seekers? If so, how?
<i>I think that asylum seekers come to Britain because they can get more money for an easier way of life.</i>	<i>I now feel that they were happier with their lives before and that they may not rather be here. Their life is a lot harder than ours and they only want the best for themselves.</i>
<i>Drain money from our economy and take our jobs and homes.</i>	<i>That they don't come here to take things from us. They come here on good terms they would rather be with their family and friends in their own homes.</i>
<i>I'm not that bothered about them, they don't bother or affect me. I don't really understand though why they choose to come to England out of all of the other countries like America.</i>	<i>My opinion has changed. I feel more sorry for them and kind of understand how they feel.</i>

Following alterations to the questionnaire format, pupils were asked three simple questions on their view of asylum seekers and whether or not the talk had changed the way they felt. Data given is collected from secondary schools in Greater London and Yorkshire and Humberside region. There is no data from pupils in the West Midlands in this stage as talks were given to primary school children for whom the questionnaire was not appropriate.

The majority of pupils in all schools felt the talk had changed their view on asylum seekers, as shown in the graph below.

Has the talk changed your view on asylum seekers?



Interestingly, there appears to be a marked difference between the schools in the London region and schools in Yorkshire and Humberside. It appears from the findings that more pupils in the London schools already had prior accurate knowledge of asylum seekers, whereas those in Yorkshire and Humberside often did not have any knowledge on the subject, and replied ‘don’t know’ when asked what they thought of asylum seekers. This therefore accounts for the greater change in perception in this region.

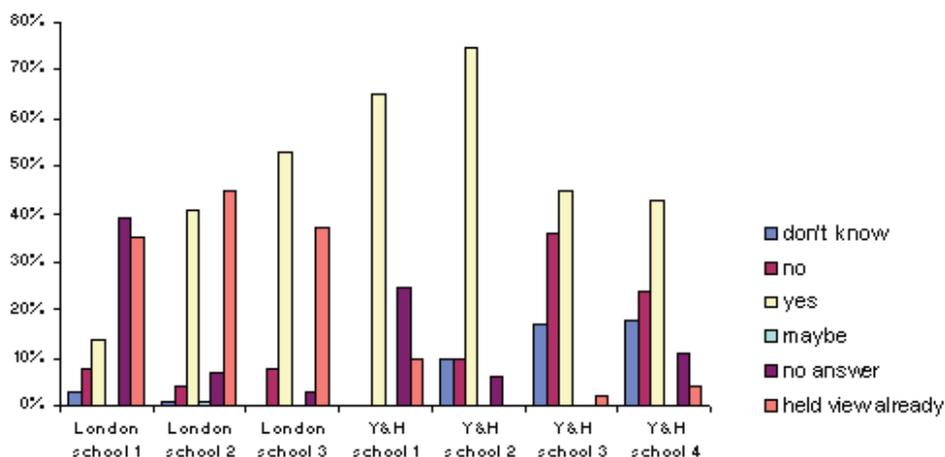
I already knew why they come but now have more information about what countries they come from and how many live in the UK
Pupil, London school 1

“I didn’t know who they were, now I know they escaped their country to be safe”
Pupil, Yorkshire & Humberside school 1

“I think the talk has helped because I didn’t know anything about it before.”
Pupil, Yorkshire & Humberside school 2

As can be seen from the graph below, the majority of pupils in London already knew why asylum seekers came to the UK, except for London School 3 where more pupils felt the talk had changed their view. Again there was a notable change in view in Yorkshire and Humberside.

Has the talk changed your view on why asylum seekers come to the UK?

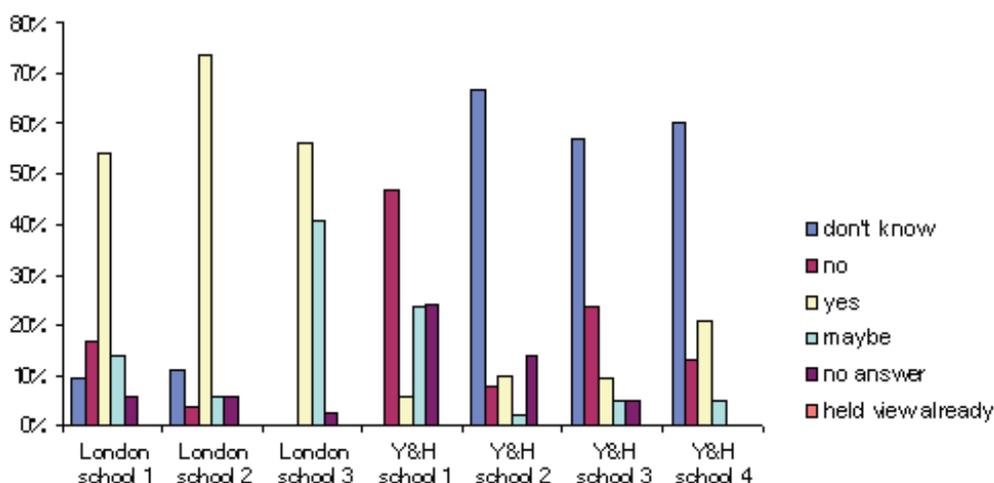


Some of the views held highlight the prevalence of negative stereotyping in school children's minds. For example, one pupil believed asylum seekers come to the UK to look for *jobs/ business or maybe a new home* and therefore the UK should not accept asylum seekers. Following the talk their view had changed: *because I know how they are suffering and that they can have a better life in the UK.*

Another pupil stated prior to the talk *I think they should have a good reason to come into our country.*, and following the talk said their views had changed: *because I never knew what they went through.*

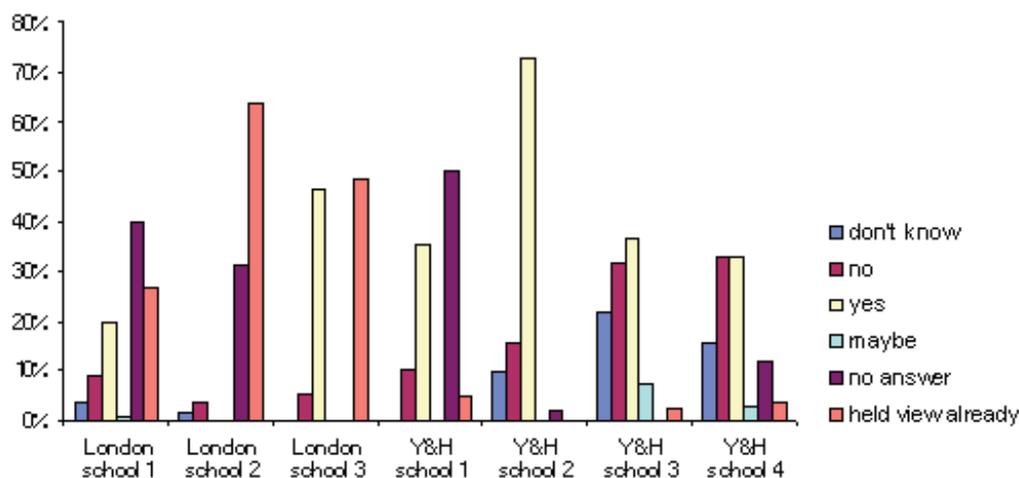
Pupils were asked prior to the talk if they thought the UK should accept asylum seekers. The majority in Yorkshire & Humberside responded 'don't know' or 'no', with London holding the view that the UK should accept asylum seekers.

Before the talk: Should the UK accept asylum seekers?



After the talk, over 30 per cent of pupils in three of the four Yorkshire and Humberside schools felt the UK should accept asylum seekers and the talk had changed their mind and in one school in this region over 70 per cent felt that talk had changed their mind. Schools in London showed a different pattern as many pupils were already aware of the plight of asylum seekers.

After the talk: Did the talk change your view on whether UK should accept asylum seekers?



In light of the negative initial views prevalent in school children, it is not difficult to understand why young people would be unwilling to disclose their immigration status or share information about their experiences with their peers as SMILE and previous research has found (Doyle and McCorriston, 2008). Such negative perceptions can only hinder refugee children's potential to achieve in school and feel settled in their new environment. However, it is encouraging that many pupils felt their views had changed after hearing the talks and gaining a greater understanding of the subject.

6.1.3 Teachers

We received feedback immediately following the talks from 16 teachers from seven different schools. The majority (58 per cent) of teachers thought delivery of talks was 'very good' with 38 per cent rating talks as 'good' and just 6 per cent rating talks as 'average'. All except two teachers felt the length of talks was sufficient or comprehensive, with one stating the talk was too short and one stating the talk was too long.

Our students were completely absorbed with the information that you provided and the stimulus kept them talking about their previous negative opinions with their peers throughout the day.

Perhaps most encouragingly, all the teachers reported that the talk would influence their teaching:

Now I have a better understanding and knowledge of refugees, asylum seekers, migrants, motivation and assimilation in another country and therefore the right tools to teach it using some clear materials.

I will incorporate elements of what was discussed when talking about challenging perceptions and people and respecting differences in people.

Most teachers stated that they felt the most helpful thing about the talks was the real life stories, either hearing stories from refugees themselves, in third person or via the SMILE films, which confirms previous research (D'Onofrio and Munk, 2004). The interactive nature of the sessions was also found to be a useful tool to enable children to empathise more with the realities refugee children face by thinking about what they would do if they had to flee the country. Where a refugee volunteer had not participated in the talks, several teachers suggested that hearing from refugees themselves would be beneficial for the

children.

Hearing about the real life story about [name] was very helpful. It helped to put this issue into context. This is real and is happening every day.

Follow up feedback was more difficult to collect, and only one teacher responded to follow up contact four months after the talk had been held. This was due to a number of reasons, one being that teachers are obviously very busy and did not always have time to respond. However the main problem was the timing: as most of the talks were held during Refugee Week in June, follow up three-four months later would have been in the middle of the school holidays when teachers would not be around to respond. Any follow up when teachers returned to school the following academic year would have been difficult as teachers were likely to be teaching different classes, and therefore would not be able to comment on how the talk had affected those particular children. As previously noted, research has recognised that evaluation of such talks is difficult and time consuming (British Red Cross, 2009; Crawley, 2009), and more work needs to be done in this area.

The teacher who did respond four months following the talk via questionnaire stated that she had noticed a difference in pupils' attitudes:

The talk received very positive feedback from the pupils, most of whom knew nothing or had preconceived ideas about refugees and asylum seekers before the talk. Their response to tasks after the session showed a very different outlook than the tasks completed 'pre-talk'.

She also felt the talk had influenced pupils' awareness:

Pupils of the age that the talk was given to (13 to 14) can be very ignorant and insensitive towards these issues, mainly due to a lack of understanding. The talk has made them really think about the situation these people have been put through and realise that they did not choose this way of life.

What works

All Volunteer Coordinators found the interactive nature of talks worked well, as well as utilising a variety of materials. The SMILE films were found to be a particularly useful resource, as pupils could see refugee young people tell their stories in their own words.⁴⁰

School talks were generally not publicised as Volunteer Coordinators found there was little need; schools generally contacted them, having heard about talks from SMILE seminars, or otherwise through Volunteer Coordinators' contacts in the local authority. Refugee Week was a particularly popular time for talks to be held. There is clearly an interest and desire on the part of schools for these talks to be held and overall, research findings indicate teachers found the talks to be useful and pupils' awareness was increased, at least on a short term basis.

What does not work:

Some of the problems encountered were logistical and appeared to be due to poor communication from or within schools, leaving Volunteer Coordinators to make visits to schools only to be told the talk was no longer possible due to timetable mix ups, or finding the talk was to a completely different age group a different length of time than previously agreed.

I was meant to do talk for 2 hours, then I was told it was one hour with a one hour gap and then I would do the other hour later, which made me late for my other job.
Volunteer Coordinator 1

Discipline was also a problem in some instances. Where teachers failed to control children, Volunteer

⁴⁰ The SMILE films were finalised towards the mid-way part of the project and so Volunteer Coordinators initially did not have use of this resource, which has proved a very valuable tool for the talks.

Coordinators obviously also found it difficult to give talks as outsiders they could not be expected to control the pupils and give a talk.

I've been to some schools, well one in particular, where teacher was just sat there doing some marking while kids ran riot, and you can't control them. They don't respect you because you are an outsider. ... Teachers were just sitting there ignoring it. Teachers need to be in control of the class otherwise it just doesn't work. It's just impossible.

Volunteer Coordinator 3

It was a bit dreadful as the teachers didn't discipline the children. I had to do discipline myself.

Volunteer Coordinator 1

During the SMILE research seminars carried out in February 2010 at which preliminary research findings were disseminated, a workshop was held on raising awareness in a school setting. Participants acknowledged the difficulty of assessing impact, due to pressure on teachers' time. Feedback mechanisms clearly need to be more robust, perhaps with a view to the school calendar.

It was suggested by workshop participants that an effective way of raising awareness would be to embed refugee issues into the curriculum, perhaps through Personal Social and Health Education (PSHE) or citizenship teaching programme. Participants also acknowledged the importance of raising awareness amongst staff and felt that perhaps newly qualified teachers would benefit from training in this area. It was also felt that awareness raising strategies would improve admissions procedures, which, it was noted, were often discriminatory in practice towards refugee children.

6.2 Summary

The evidence obtained provides a snapshot of just over 20 per cent of school talks conducted and illustrates the positive impact these talks had on young people in a school setting. Indeed, the pre-talk data collected reveals the very powerful impact that negative stereotyping of, and misinformation about, refugees and asylum seekers is having on young people in the UK. There is a clear need to challenge these misperceptions by providing accurate, factual information about the reality of the lives of refugees and asylum seekers, which is what SMILE seeks to do. The evidence from SMILE, whilst limited in scale, reveals a picture of greater understanding and empathy towards the plight of refugees and asylum seekers once young people are informed of the facts.

As evidenced from interviews with SMILE young people, many were unwilling to disclose much about their personal experiences with their peers, feeling that they were too different or that they would not understand. Awareness raising talks can serve to normalise these issues and provide greater understanding in all young people, enabling refugee children to better integrate.

7. SMILE logistical issues

7.1 Volunteer recruitment

Volunteers were recruited through Refugee Council online portal, or through other voluntary sector organisations such as do-it.org.uk, or volunteer bureaux. Volunteer Coordinators also promoted the project at external conferences and events as well as the SMILE seminars held in February 2010. There was a high level of interest and Volunteer Coordinators did not need to externally recruit, unless there was a specific need, for example in Yorkshire & Humberside the Volunteer Coordinator targeted a volunteer through the Deaf and Blind Society in order to assist a young person who was hearing impaired.

Volunteers were selected through online application form and formal interview. Once selected, volunteers attended tailored made training sessions to prepare them for their role. Volunteer Coordinators did note that due to the length of time it could take between an applicant sending in their application form and being selected, there were instances where volunteers then withdrew their application as too much time had passed and their circumstances had changed. They also noted that over time the selection process improved and had got more selective; one of the shortcomings of short term projects being that the learning process is then lost.

7.2 Volunteer training

Prior to being matched with a young person, volunteers underwent a two to three day training programme run by Volunteer Coordinators in each of the three regions. Training covered topics such as understanding refugee children and young people's needs and experiences, boundaries, mentoring and befriending, child protection, what to expect and support networks available to volunteers.

On completion of training volunteers were asked to complete a training evaluation form. A total of 85 volunteer training evaluation forms were collected. Overall, volunteers gave very positive feedback about the training and had found it useful. All volunteers stated the training helped them understand more about mentoring and befriending, with many stating it had helped them feel more confident about what to expect from their mentee/befriender and the role.

It made me feel a lot more confident about starting my mentoring role and also making clear the boundaries/role.

Participants particularly found the role playing component of training to be useful, followed by general information on refugees and asylum seekers. Volunteers felt they had learnt how to be an effective mentor or befriender (43 per cent), general knowledge on asylum and education issues (26 per cent), and an understanding of boundaries (16 per cent).

The large majority of participants found every aspect of the training useful, with only eight per cent stating they felt some issues to be 'common sense'. Many expressed how much they had enjoyed the training and found it to be useful and relevant to their role.

Very thought provoking training - opened my eyes to people's, children's, problems.



7.3 Matching

Once trained, volunteers were then matched with a suitable young person. The time between completing training and being matched was sometimes lengthy, as matching is a very important part of the process. In some instances, volunteers then have moved on as their circumstances change. Overall, Volunteer Coordinators reported that the matching process was good, with very few relationships that ended prematurely. Young people were generally happy to get assistance, and the key element was commitment.

All volunteers who have had relationships have been fabulous. Very high quality volunteers
Volunteer Coordinator 2

I also thought the Volunteer Coordinator made a good match, which was important as I felt I was actually able to help my mentee.
Volunteer

Volunteer retention was very good in all regions, with some volunteers having been with SMILE since the project started. However, as is the case with voluntary projects where the contractual obligation is based on voluntary will, unforeseen circumstances can cause commitment problems that in a paid employment setting are less frequent.

Volunteers will always be volunteers. Even ones who are really committed, I've had a few who had personal things happen in their lives and so they have gone. The difference with paid employment is perhaps that people stop earlier than they would otherwise. ... Sometimes, volunteers don't communicate things to you. For example a death in the family, don't always contact you. But for paid employment if something like that happened, you would have to contact work very quickly.
Volunteer Coordinator 1

A total of 101 young people have been successfully supported in mentoring or befriending relationships at the end of the data collection phase. However, as with any relationship based project, there have been some difficulties. A total of 24 relationships across the three regions ended prematurely, due to a number of reasons including: a young person being detained, young people moving cities, volunteers having personal problems or no longer being able to commit due to employment requirements, young people not engaging, and young people disappearing. The main issue that led to problems was commitment, which was something young people obviously really valued from their mentor or befriender.

One young person was matched to a volunteer from [his own country], which went well and the young person opened up, he was able to speak in his own language. Then it fell through as the man had problems in own family. The young person was really upset. He has now been matched with young British woman, but he is really happy now. He's just responded very well to fact that she is very reliable and will meet him once a week without fail and is very committed.

Volunteer Coordinator 1

This example also serves to highlight the role of Volunteer Coordinators in providing back up support to young people and ensuring that if relationships were not working out change would happen, either in the form of a new volunteer or improve on the issues. Indeed, young people interviewed often stated how helpful Volunteer Coordinators were, referring to them as 'friendly', 'helpful' and 'nice'. The project manager was also mentioned as a source of support by some young people.

7.4 Volunteer Support

Volunteer Coordinators provide support and assistance to all volunteers via regular supervisory meetings and telephone/ email contact as well as group supervision. Evidence from interviews with volunteers and volunteer exit forms that were completed by some volunteers upon ending their role with SMILE revealed that all volunteers were very satisfied with the level of support received from Volunteer Coordinators and the SMILE project in general. All found coordinators helpful, approachable and felt they had the right level of support for their needs.

It's been amazing, I would like to say that I have done a lot of volunteering ...and ... it's the best volunteer management I've ever experienced in terms of having someone there who has always been approachable and all the way through I have felt like the SMILE project has been getting in touch with me the right amount. ... I have always felt like there have been opportunities to talk about things and share how it's been going ... and just the fact that you know regular meetings happen.

Volunteer

Whilst the majority of volunteers did not experience such problems, one mentor faced a difficult time when her mentee threatened to kill himself, and obviously found it distressing and difficult. This experience seemed to be the exception rather than the rule, and the mentee had a very high level of support needs. Nonetheless, it outlines the difficulties that can arise when working with particularly vulnerable and traumatised young people and it is a shame the volunteer did not feel more supported during this difficult time.

I feel that I did get support but ... I felt there could have been more support in terms of [mentee] was a high risk refugee child and the fact that he self harmed a lot, was suicidal, he wasn't in counselling; he had problems with his foster carers to the extent that he had to get removed ... and ... my mentee, started contacting me at night; he started to send me emails saying he was going to kill himself and ... I think when it came to that stage, when I was saying this is what's happening and forwarding the emails I think there should have been more input from the Refugee Council to say: okay we need to intervene a bit, I felt in that whole period, I felt quite alone.

Volunteer

One thing volunteers did say they would have liked more of was the opportunity to meet other volunteers and share experiences. However, researchers did feed this back at an early stage to the project team who had subsequently arranged on occasion volunteer meetings and take up had been poor. The nature of the SMILE project role is that many people who volunteer work full time or have other commitments, and therefore it proved difficult to arrange things at times when many volunteers would be able to attend.

7.5 Website

Only two of the 17 volunteers interviewed had used the website and one of them only initially. The majority were only vaguely aware of the website and did not use it or feel it was useful for them, although they had not looked in detail at what was on the site and were not aware that toolkits were available detailing information about supporting refugee children or mentoring and befriending. Almost all volunteers felt they had received enough information during their initial training session and that if they had a need they could simply refer to the Volunteer Coordinator or project manager for assistance. Also the nature of the relationships was such that volunteers played a practical role in the lives of young people and did not see the need to spend time on the website as part of their role. Most worked full time or had other commitments and so time was an issue. It was also noted that the website is a public resource, and did not function as an intranet, so volunteers felt it was not particularly a resource for them.

7.6 Summary

Overall, feedback from the project has been very positive and it would appear that project outcomes were in line with aspirations. The number of successful relationships that lasted a significant period of time and positive feedback from volunteers about the value they perceived in the project and their role is testimony to the success of the project. Training has worked and volunteers were well prepared for their role and ably supported by Volunteer Coordinators and the project manager, leading to successful matches. An area the project was less successful was in interaction between volunteers, perhaps more could be done to involve volunteers through an online portal where they could share stories and experiences, and this could be more widely publicised amongst volunteers.

8. Conclusion and recommendations

8.1 Conclusion

Evidence from the SMILE project highlights the need for such a project for refugee children, particularly separated young people who do not have family in the UK

. Research findings show the positive impact the relationships had on young people in terms of their ability to access education but also achieve more educationally and socially. The support of the trusted guide, in the form of their mentor or befriender, enabled young people to build up their resilience and improve their language skills, better enabling them to integrate into UK life and reduce the impacts of the trauma they have experienced. Being able to access an educational placement was of significant importance for these young people, not just in terms of educational development but their overall wellbeing. Without the assistance of SMILE volunteers, findings suggest these young people would have struggled to find a place.

Unfortunately, research findings show that refugee children are still facing many barriers in accessing education and as previous research has highlighted this has been the case for some time. Many young people in SMILE had spent months out of education due to waiting lists in further education colleges, impacting negatively upon their personal development. Admissions policies appear to be inconsistent, and young people, both separated and in families, struggled to negotiate the English education system alone. The fact that two young people supported by SMILE had to take legal action against a local authority to ensure they could access mainstream education is a sad indication of the problems that many young people face and evidence of the need for greater clarity and guidance in this area.

While some alternative education provision can be beneficial, particularly if there are no places within mainstream colleges, sending refugee young people to Pupil Referral Units is clearly not appropriate for children who are engaged and willing to learn. Alternative education should also not be used to compensate for schools who are reluctant to accept asylum seekers or refugees, and should only be used where no mainstream places are available or it is considered in the best interests of the child. As previous DCSF (now DfE) guidance states, the onus on schools is “that provision for newly arrived EAL learners is not separate but integrated into all subject areas. The focus is therefore on learning and teaching in the mainstream classroom.” (DCSF, 2007:5).

Education is a right for all children regardless of immigration status and is enshrined in international and national covenants. The protection needs of refugee children include education, as well as survival issues of health and nutrition. However, it appears that at present the rights to education for refugee children are being undermined by lack of cohesive policy on their access to education and discriminatory practices which serve to exclude them from mainstream education.

The findings also highlight the negative impact that age assessment has upon young people’s wellbeing, and the difficulties it causes in terms of their access to education. The nature of the age determination process, its subjectivity and the length of time taken for a resolution, is leaving many children seeking asylum isolated and without access to education. Without any statutory procedure or guidance, local authority policies and practices in the age determination process can be inconsistent and variable, causing further distress for children seeking asylum.

With so many barriers to overcome, the social activities young people were able to access through SMILE provided a welcome source of distraction and fun, but also functioned as spaces for informal learning and as mechanisms to enable refugee young people to feel more settled in their new environment. Young people were able to develop social skills and networks, improve their English and learn more about the UK in a fun way.

Evidence from the school talks findings highlights the pervasive nature of negative stereotypes about refugees and asylum seekers in the minds of school pupils, and how this can lead to a less inclusive environment for refugee children. Prior to the talks, many pupils expressed ideas about asylum seekers that were based on inaccurate information, such as that often published in popular press. Whilst limited in scope, the talks did show that having heard the real life stories of refugees and understood why people come to the UK to seek asylum, pupils were more sympathetic and understanding to the needs of asylum seekers.

The success of SMILE is evident in the developments of the young people, their ability to access education with the support of volunteers and the very positive feedback all interviewees gave on their experiences. Expectations and aspirations were overall in line with project outcomes and SMILE has proved a successful and beneficial project, enabling both young people and volunteers to feel they gained from the project. SMILE provides a space for positive contacts between people of diverse backgrounds: providing opportunities for young people to learn more about UK life and culture, as well as language, in an informal, supportive way and space for volunteers to have greater understanding of what brings asylum seekers to the UK, and their experiences. This interaction can only have positive implications for wider themes of inclusion and community cohesion.

8.2 Recommendations

- Voluntary sector organisations should take learning from the SMILE project forward and develop specialist mentoring and befriending services for refugees and asylum seekers to better enable them to access education and achieve more in their education. This could be done through joint projects with local authorities.

Department for Education should:

- Develop statutory guidance on the education of refugee children in relation to admissions procedures and support in the classroom.
- Ensure that, following proposed alterations to the education system in the White Paper, the definitive suite of guidance to be produced for schools includes guidance on the education of refugee children. Such guidance should be widely disseminated and promoted so that schools are aware of it.
- Provide learner support funds to all children and young people in further education between the ages of 16 and nineteen, regardless of immigration status. This is particularly important in light of the fact that the school leaving age will be raised to 17 by 2013 and 18 by 2015.
- Ensure that any anti-bullying strategies contain provisions for bullying experienced by refugee children.
- Ensure that the Revised Admissions Code contains provisions for asylum seekers and refugees.
- Develop statutory guidance on conducting age assessments.

Local authorities should:

- Ensure all policies and guidance to support looked after children in schools are implemented appropriately.
- Provide advice and guidance to young people and their parents/carers when they first arrive in the UK on how to access education.
- Develop a more consistent approach to admissions procedures and develop better lines of communication so as to promote good practice.
- Understand that the use of pupil referral units as alternative source of education for refugees and asylum seekers is never appropriate, such pupils should have access to mainstream schooling where possible and appropriate alternative provision where not. The decision should always be based on individual child's needs.
- Alternative educational provision for refugee children outside the mainstream should be time limited with clear objectives, in line with guidance in this area (DCSF, 2007).
- Monitor the support provided by social workers and keyworkers, ensure it is adequate and that young people have appropriate mechanisms to complain when it is not.
- Monitor the support of refugee children in schools in a systematic way.
- Consider a more holistic approach to age assessment, with evidence taken from wide range of individuals involved in child's care.

Schools should:

- Ensure teachers receive training on initial teacher training programmes and also as part of continuing professional development on the needs and experience of refugees and asylum seekers.
- Hold more awareness raising sessions, such as the SMILE school talks programmes, within school settings to increase knowledge of asylum seekers and refugees amongst all staff and pupils and reduce misperceptions and prejudice.

UKBA should:

- Ensure that the protection needs of children in the asylum system are upheld and that immigration controls should not be prioritised over the welfare of this group of children.

Refugee Council should:

- Promote the learning from the SMILE project and integrate volunteers in the operational workings of the organisation.
- Continue to work to raise awareness of refugee issues in school settings by running school talks programmes and interactive workshops across all regions in which it operates.
- Conduct further research into the advantages and disadvantages of alternative provision on refugee children and the quality of provision on offer.

Appendix 1: SMILE Young people demographics

ID	Relationship/child's status	Age	Gender	1st Language	Nationality
1	Mentee - Separated child	17	Female	Tigrinya	Eritrean
2	Befriender - Separated child	17 (18)*	Male	Dari	Afghani
3	Mentee - Separated child	14 (16)	Male	Dari	Afghani
4	Mentee - Separated child		Male	Pashto	Afghani
5	Mentoring - Separated child	15	Male	Dari	Afghani
6	Mentoring - Separated child	17	Male	Farsi	Iranian
7	Mentoring - Child in family	10	Female	Somali	Somali
8	Befriending (middle) - Separated child	15	male	Dari	Afghani
9	Mentoring - Separated child	16	Male	Pashto	Afghani
10	Mentoring - Separated child	15 (19)	female	Bengali	Bangladeshi
11	Befriending - Separated child	17 (18)	Male	Dari	Afghani
12	Mentoring - Separated child	14 (18)	Male	Pashto	Afghani
13	Mentoring/befriending - Child in family	11	Female	Farsi	Iranian
14	Befriending - Separated child	17	Female	Amharic	Eritrean
15	Mentoring - separated child	17	Male	Kurdish Sorani	Iraqi
16	Befriending CiF x 2	16 14	Female Male	Italian, Arabic, English	Iraqi
17	Befriending - Separated child (S4)	15 (18)	Male	Pashto	Afghani
18	Befriending - Child in family	10	Female	Farsi	Iranian
19	Befriending Separated child	16	Male	Farsi	Afghani

*ages in brackets are the age the young person has been disputed as.

Appendix 2: Interview Schedules

Questions for befrienders – HALF WAY

In the middle of the befriending relationship (approximately 6 months in)

1. How do you feel that your befriending has gone so far?
2. What have you achieved during the first 6 months of working with your befriender?
3. Are there things that have not worked out well?
If so, what were they?
Why do you think things did not work well?
4. Are there other things that you are you are doing with your befriender that you did not plan at the beginning?
If so, what are they?
5. Is there anything you would like to change about your first 6 months?
6. Does your mentee/befriender have a carer or social worker, if so, what kind of support, if any, have you provided?
How was your relationship?
7. Do you feel confident you have an 'exit strategy' prepared for the end of the relationship?
8. Are you happy with the support you are receiving from your Volunteer Coordinator?
9. Have you visited SMILE the website as a means of support?
If yes, did you find it useful?
If no, why not?
10. Is there anything else you would like to add about your experiences over the last 6 months?

Questions for befriendees-HALF WAY

In the middle of the befriending relationship (approximately 6 months in)

1. How do you feel that the befriending has gone so far?
2. What has your befriender helped you to achieve during the last 6 months?
3. Are there things that have not worked out well?
If so, what were they?
4. Are there other things that your befriender is helping you with that you did not plan at the beginning?
If so, what are they?
5. Does you have a carer or social worker, if so, what kind of support, if any, has your befriender provided?
How often do you see social worker?

6. Is there anything you would like to change about your first 6 months?
 7. Are you happy with the support you received from your befriender?
 8. Is there anything else you would like to add about your experiences over the last 6 months?
-

Questions for mentees/befriendees

At the beginning of the mentoring/befriending relationship (These will be asked by the volunteer co-ordinator)

What things would you like your mentor/befriender to help you with?

At the end of the mentoring/befriending relationship

Expectations

When you first linked with your mentor/befriender, what kind of help did you think you would get?

Did you receive the types of help you were expecting?

Practical issues

How often did you meet with your mentor/befriender?

Are you happy with that amount?

Where did you meet?

Were you happy with this?

Experiences of mentoring/befriending

Do you think have a mentor/befriender has been useful to you?

If so, how?

If not, why not?

Tell me the most important thing that you are doing now which you would not have been doing before you had a mentor/befriender programme?

If you were not in education before working with your mentor/ befriender can you explain why and for how long?

what did you do to access school/ college and how long did it take?

What did you do while waiting/ how did you feel?

Has the mentoring programme helped you with your studies?

If so, how did it help?

Do you have a social worker/ key worker?

If so, how often do you see them?

Did you feel happy to share your problems with your mentor/befriender?

Do you think the mentor/befriender has understood your needs?

Has your mentor/befriender helped you to make friends?
If so, how?

What other ways has the support of your mentor/befriender helped you?
(*Prompt – emotional support?*)

Do you tell your friends you have a mentor/befriender?
If so, what do they think?

Would you recommend the mentoring/befriending services to other people?
If so, why?
Who would you recommend it to?

Which parts of the mentoring/befriending work did you enjoy most?

Which parts of the mentoring/befriending did not work well?

Have you stopped working with your mentor/ befriender? Will you see them again? If so, how often and how long for?

Do you have anything else that you wish to say about the mentoring/befriending programme?

Questions for mentors/befrienders

At the beginning of the mentoring/befriending relationship

What made you want to become a mentor/befriender?

What is the most important thing you would like to achieve from taking part in the mentoring/befriending programme?

At the end of the activity

Expectations

When you first linked with your mentee/befriendee, what kind of help did you think you would provide?

Did the work that you actually did reflect the expectations you had at the beginning of the process?

Identifying needs and assessing progress

How did you set the set targets of what you wanted to achieve with your mentee/befriendee?

How did you monitor and evaluate your progress towards these targets?

Practical issues

How often did you meet with your mentee/befriendee?

Are you happy with that amount?

Where did you meet?

Were you happy with this?

Experiences of mentoring/befriending

Do you think the work you have done with your mentee/befriendee had a positive impact?

If yes, in what ways?

If no, why not?

What do you think has been the most important thing you have achieved for you mentee/befriendee?

Does your mentee/befriendee have a carer or social worker, if so, what kind of support, if any, have you provided?

How was your relationship?

Has your help ever failed to make the positive impact you hoped?

If so, please explain how and the ways you tried to rectify this.

Accessing Education/ Services

Was the young person you supported in education when you started working together? If not, do you know why and for how long they had been out of education?

If relevant, can you explain how you managed to access an educational placement for your mentee and how long this took?

Have you assisted your mentee/befriendee access other services (e.g. health) and, if so, did you experience any difficulties?

Support

How often did you meet with your Volunteer Coordinator?

Are you happy with the support you received from your Volunteer Coordinator?

Did you feel share your successes and frustrations with the Volunteer Coordinator?

Did you visit the website as a means of support?

Did you find the website useful?

(If yes, how? If no, what would you have liked to see on it?)

Future

How did you prepare your mentee/befriendee for the end of the relationship?

Do you feel you have learnt new skills and knowledge as a results of the mentoring/befriending work you have done?

If so, please describe the things you have learnt.

Do you think you would mentor a refugee child again?

Why or why not?

Do you have anything else that you wish to say about the mentoring/befriending programme?

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As the leading charity working with asylum seekers and refugees in the UK, the Refugee Council is committed to working towards creating a fair, humane and effective asylum system that provides protection and enables refugees to rebuild their lives in safety.

The Supporting and Mentoring in Learning and Education (SMILE) project was a three-year project set up by the Refugee Council in 2008. The project was funded by the Department for Education (DfE) (formerly Department for Children Schools and Families (DCSF)) and operated across three regions: Greater London, the West Midlands, and Yorkshire and Humberside. It supported asylum seeking and refugee children (both separated and in families) to improve their life chances by helping them to enjoy and achieve in education, and by raising awareness of their specific needs.

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