



The Refugee Council's response to the government's green paper on youth services:

"Youth Matters"

November 2005

Please note: This document has been edited in order to comply with the Refugee Council house style.

About the Refugee Council

The Refugee Council is the largest organisation in the UK working with asylum seekers and refugees. We not only give help and support to asylum seekers and refugees, but also work with them to ensure their needs and concerns are addressed by decision-makers. Therefore, we welcome the opportunity to respond to the consultation paper, *Youth Matters*.

Introduction

- 1.1 The Refugee Council has a long tradition of working with children, in particular through our Panel of Advisers for Unaccompanied Refugee Children (Children's Panel). We believe that every refugee or asylum seeking child in the UK should:
- feel safe, secure and loved, be listened to and have a responsible guardian to turn to;
 - receive accurate advice, appropriate guidance and support throughout the asylum determination procedure thus ensuring the fairest outcome for them;
 - be seen as a child and a refugee rather than primarily a refugee.
- 1.2 The children and young people we see at the Refugee Council broadly reflect the population of refugee young people arriving in the UK. The vast majority of children and young people seeking asylum alone, without adult family members, are aged over 13. The proportion of children and young people who apply for asylum as part of a family are from a wider age range, but significant numbers each year arrive between the ages of 10 and 17.
- 1.3 The young people we work with have had a range of experiences leading to them seeking refuge in the UK. Many have experienced or witnessed human rights abuses, including violence in their home country and, as indicated above, a significant number are separated from their families. Additionally, their experiences in the UK vary widely. Most of the unaccompanied children and young people we work with are cared for by local authority social services departments as looked after children and care leavers, and experience many of the difficulties shared by their peers in those systems. The Refugee Council feels that the combination of those factors and the absence of a legal guardian result in them becoming particularly vulnerable and often marginalised. Indeed, in *Every Child Matters* unaccompanied children seeking asylum were described as "some of the children in greatest need"¹.
- 1.4 It is within this context that we respond to *Youth Matters*. We have chosen to respond to the parts of the document that we feel are particularly relevant to our client group, and thus have not answered all of the consultation questions in the paper. Our response is given below and is largely structured using the chapter headings in *Youth Matters*.

¹ *Every Child Matters* is a green paper, which was published in September 2003 as part of the government's new approach to the well-being of children and young people from birth to age 19: www.everychildmatters.gov.uk/publications

2. Context: Young people and services today

- 2.1 We commend the government for using recent research to support its views on how young people are currently faring. What is noticeable, however, is the lack of research addressing the outcomes for refugee and asylum seeking young people. Research has been conducted on a local, regional and national scale, which looks at issues relating to refugee children and young people, including access to services appropriate to their needs². Assessing how the support provided relates to their long term well-being would be a useful indicator of how well the current system is serving young refugees and asylum seekers.
- 2.2 This lack of longitudinal data means we are reliant on the research that already exists and the individual experiences of children and young people with whom the Refugee Council has worked. These young people fit within many of the groups highlighted as facing challenges in chapter two of *Youth Matters*. Many of our young people are homeless or living in temporary accommodation, are or have been in care and by definition the majority are from black and minority ethnic backgrounds.
- 2.3 We welcome the acknowledgement that mainstream government funded services are not the only services addressing the needs of young people. The Refugee Council's Children's Panel established a youth group as a response to the isolation reported by many of our clients. As with any youth service, this group addresses a variety of needs, maybe above all the need for the clients to feel that for one evening each week they are young people first and asylum seekers or refugees second. We find it an efficient and appropriate way to ensure that where needed, once a week at least they have an adult to whom they can turn, as well as having fun in a safe environment.
- 2.4 We also welcome the recognition that there remains a need for youth work and that all those providing youth services should be aiming for the highest quality youth work to be undertaken with young people. Subsequent chapters focus very much on activities, advice, guidance and structure. The Refugee Council feels that more attention should be paid to some of the valuable work currently being done to help young people understand and cope with the difficulties they face as teenagers, including sexual health, family dynamics and cultural diversity issues. The children and young people with whom we work most closely rely on youth work to help fill the gaps left by parents who are either physically or emotionally unavailable to them.
- 2.5 While some services, like the Refugee Council's own youth group, should be targeted and focussed on the particular needs and aspirations of a specific group of young people, we feel that more could be done to encourage mainstream services to adequately meet the youth work needs of isolated and vulnerable young people, many of them with language needs in addition to

² For example, *Children First and Foremost, Barnados 2000; Cold Comfort, Save the Children 2001; A case for change, Refugee Council et al 2002; Starting over: Young refugees talk about life in Britain, The Princes Trust 2003; Offering more than they borrow, Greater London Authority 2004*

those outlined above. A key mechanism for achieving this would be through increased involvement of refugee community organisations in mainstream provision.³

3. Vision, challenges and principles: Our approach to reform

- 3.1 The Refugee Council broadly agrees with the four key challenges that the government must overcome in order to achieve its vision for reform to support all teenagers. However, some of the principles upon which reform is based concern us.
- 3.2 In making services more responsive to what young people and parents want it is equally important to understand that those who currently enjoy greater access to youth services have an unfair advantage in getting their views heard by policy makers and those with the power to design services. We would like to see specific measures established to ensure that those without parents to speak for them, or who are disadvantaged in the ways that have already been highlighted, will be served well and are able to enjoy both integrated and focussed support.
- 3.3 In balancing greater opportunities and support with promoting young people's responsibilities we must not ignore the very real and fundamental inequalities that exist between children and young people in today's society. Our concern around this principle largely relates to the proposed 'opportunity cards' and 'opportunity funds' schemes and is, therefore, expanded upon below.

4. Empowering young people: Things to do and places to go

- 4.1. Our concerns about the principle on which this chapter is based are outlined at 3.2 and 3.3. above. We believe that the proposal to introduce 'opportunity cards' as described in *Youth Matters* would be counterproductive to the aims of social inclusion and unhelpful in the drive towards achieving the five *Every Child Matters* outcomes. Whilst of course our vision is that all the young people with whom we work are supported to aim high and achieve their potential, some of them will be experiencing profound difficulties and hostility in their daily lives and will find simply existing a daily struggle. A structure that provides more opportunities and rewards for those who are able to engage in volunteering and involvement in 'positive activities' implies that those who are unable to do so will not receive some of the opportunities that they really need.
- 4.2. Similarly, we are concerned that the proposal to introduce 'opportunity funds' will result in those young people identified as being particularly disadvantaged or marginalised having little power to influence the services that would really help them. Whilst we support measures to allow young people more say in how local services are delivered, safeguards need to be introduced so that such funds do not simply provide for the many and ignore the few. Some of

³ *Out of Exile, Developing Youth Work with Young Refugees, Youth Work Press 2000*

this can be achieved through the skilled work of experienced professionals who are both able and encouraged to engage some of the more disadvantaged young people. However, particular attention should be paid to those who may benefit from services that aim to meet their specific needs, such as those who speak English as an additional language and those who need help to orient themselves and integrate into a new society.

- 4.3. The Refugee Council welcomes the statutory duty to be placed on local authorities to secure positive activities for young people. We agree that children's trusts must ensure that the particular needs of young people who face specific barriers to accessing activities are taken into account when planning and commissioning activities. We would therefore question why, if the government is serious about this duty, *Youth Matters* proposes guidance to make sure this happens, as opposed to it being intrinsic to the overall duty.

5. Young people as citizens: Making a contribution

- 5.1 We have little comment on this chapter as we broadly welcome the proposals to encourage more young people to volunteer and contribute to our communities. The Refugee Council values the volunteers who work with us and is always looking for ways for our clients to become more involved in the communities in which they live. We benefit from the willingness of a range of people, including former clients, who volunteer with us. We know from our experience and that of our clients that volunteering is of huge benefit, particularly for young people and those that are new to the country.
- 5.2 However, we firmly believe that volunteering should be genuinely voluntary. We are particularly concerned at the linking of rewards with volunteering. Many of the young people with whom we work will, in time, feel able to make a positive contribution to the community in which they live. However, we do not agree that this is an appropriate use of opportunity cards and believe that celebrating and recognising the achievement of young people is a separate system to that of service provision.
- 5.3 We urge the government to ensure that any financial support for volunteers takes account of the particular situation of young asylum seekers. The majority of these young people are currently excluded from mainstream provision such as benefits administered through the Department for Work and Pensions and the provision of financial support for 16-19 year-olds in education. In order for these young people to feel they are valued as part of communities they need to be treated equally and given the same rights as other young people in this respect.

6. Supporting choices: Information, advice and guidance

- 6.1 We welcome the attention that is paid to the quality and provision of information, advice and guidance (IAG) to young people as a key part of the responsibilities that adults have towards children and young people.

- 6.2 However, we are disappointed at the proposals, as they are disproportionately focussed on IAG related to education and employment issues. We agree that this is a major issue for young people, which should be, afforded due attention. However, we work with young people who have a range of difficulties and anxieties, resulting in a need for IAG to be specialist in many different areas and delivered through a variety of routes. The key need of our clients is for good quality, specialist children's immigration legal advice. In addition many will need IAG on children's rights, social welfare, housing and access to services as well as specific needs such as those who wish to make contact with family overseas.
- 6.3 We agree that young people need access to individually tailored IAG that is comprehensive and impartial. The Refugee Council believes that the most effective way of achieving this aim is for all children here without family members to have a legal guardian. The guardian should be appointed independently of the care they receive from local authority social services departments and should have the power, responsibility and accountability of guardians appointed to children who are involved with domestic legal proceedings.
- 6.4 We do not envisage guardians for unaccompanied children providing a substitute for the work that is done by a variety of statutory and voluntary agencies to ensure that young people have the best possible information, advice and guidance on the range of issues affecting them. However, in addition to achieving parity with all children, by having an adult responsible for them, legal guardianship would ensure that these vulnerable children and young people are making informed decisions about their lives after receiving information, advice and guidance on a range of issues affecting them.

7. All young people achieving: Reforming targeted support

- 7.1 We broadly welcome the statement that some young people are more at risk than others and therefore need more targeted support. We urge the government to ensure that these children and young people are treated as vulnerable and that services designed to support them recognise the need for the cause of their difficulties to be addressed, as well as providing support to cope with those difficulties.
- 7.2 The Refugee Council would like to see more attention paid to some of the risks associated with being a young person who is seeking asylum or who is a refugee, in particular those who are also looked after children or care leavers. The chapter has a disproportionate focus on those at risk of offending, teenage conception or substance misuse. We are concerned that as a result additional support services will be targeted towards these groups of young people at the expense of those at risk for other reasons.
- 7.3 As outlined above, the Refugee Council believes that some of the risks faced by unaccompanied young people could be partly reduced by appointing a guardian, whose role would include ensuring the young person was accessing appropriate services and supporting them to make decisions about their lives in the absence of a parent. We do not feel that the role of lead professional, as

outlined in this chapter, goes far enough to ensure that the young person's best interests are addressed, although we welcome the principle that support should be integrated and co-ordinated.

We hope you find our comments useful and feel that they are sufficiently structured to enable you to take them into account in the development of this work. Once again we welcome the initiative shown by this government in aiming to achieve the best possible life chances for all our young people. Whilst we want the needs of refugee children in particular to be addressed, we very much support the principle of inclusion that is fundamental to provision of services to all children and young people.

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