

The Children's Section Age Dispute & Detention Adviser, Francesco Jeff answered questions live via email, Facebook and Twitter

Name	Question
Melissa	I would like to ask Francesco whether if in his opinion Social Workers are trained sufficiently to carry out age assessment and also how the age assessments could be more accurate without being intrusive?
<p>"Hi Melissa, my colleagues and I go to lots of age assessments carried out by social workers. We see a real variation in social worker training and skills. There is no official training or guidance for social workers doing this very important and very difficult job. Some seem to have a real understanding of the role and of how hard it must be for the young person to go through this process. Others act like immigration officers and ask lots of upsetting questions which don't have anything to do with the young person's age. It is usually not possible to be 100% accurate about how old someone is, and benefit of the doubt must be given, otherwise you end up with children treated as adults. Many children don't know their exact date of birth and come from places where birthdays are not celebrated but will have a good idea roughly how old they are. It would help some social workers to have a bit more understanding of the culture of the children they are assessing. It surprises us how many decisions seem to be largely based on physical appearance, when we all know from our own experience that teenagers of similar age can look very different. It would be great if there was more independent training for social workers on how to do better age assessments. "</p>	

Name	Question
Nicola	Is there anything we can do to help these children personally?
<p>"Hi Nicola, thanks for your question, it's fantastic that you want to help. One of the most important ways that people can help children such as Mohib who are in this country without parents or a guardian, is by donating to the Refugee Council so that we can continue our work with them. Our support provides a vital lifeline to them but we depend on voluntary donations.</p> <p>You can find more information on our work with young refugees here: www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/agedispute. Why not organise a RefuTEA for International Human Rights Day? See http://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/supportourwork/fundraise_for_us/refutea for more information.</p> <p>If you'd rather donate your time than your money, here at the Refugee Council we rely volunteer support – in fact we have almost as many volunteers as we have staff! Our work would be impossible without their support. You can find out more about our volunteering opportunities here: http://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/volunteering. If you do not live near a Refugee Council office, there'll be other charities and organisations supporting refugees and asylum seekers that I'm sure would equally appreciate your support. "</p>	

Naomi	How can we change such deep suspicion by authorities and inhumane treatment of vulnerable people?
James	The Afghan boy's story was so shocking. One thing that worried me (aside from his awful experiences in detention here) was the dangerous journey he made across many countries to get to the UK – why is it that none of those countries were prepared to help him, and he was forced to travel all the way here before he could get protection? I've heard this often happens, and wonder why people can't claim asylum in other safe countries they reach first?

“We get asked this quite often. Most children are not in control of how they travel and where they end up; family or agents will make the arrangements and the child doesn't really get a choice. If you think about the countries that neighbour the most common refugee producing countries, well they do have lots of refugees; for example there have been millions of Afghan refugees in Iran and Pakistan for many years. Where people do have some choice, what they tell is that they will go to a country where they will be safe and that has a good record of treating people fairly. “

Jenny	I thought the dispatches programme was really moving, I agreed with the woman who said that the treatment of refugees make you embarrassed to be British. I don't understand - didn't the government say that they were going to end child detention, why hasn't it happened? What can we do to remind them they pledged this?
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“Yes, the government announced that immigration detention for children was going to end and lots of us working in this area got very excited about that, but it hasn't actually happened yet. What the government has decided to do is try out other ways of forcibly removing families without using detention. We are frustrated with this as the focus is still all on the end of the process; what needs to happen is for the entire process to be looked at – not just the end. So, we will carry on saying stop detaining children while you look for other ways to carry out your removals, as you are continuing to harm children like Mershad and that's just not acceptable.

There's lots of work been done on this by us and other organisations. We contributed to the government review on child detention earlier this year see [<http://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/policy/responses/2010/detention-of-children>] and continue to support Outcry!

[http://www.childrensociety.org.uk/all_about_us/how_we_do_it/campaigning2/OutCry!/19866.asp] the campaign to end immigration detention of children. We will continue to campaign on this issue – if you'd like to be involved you can sign up to receive our campaign actions – just send an email to campaigns@refugeecouncil.org.uk asking to subscribe. “

Karla	Do UKBA staff (including immigration officers) have sufficient training on assessing someone's age?
<p>“They don’t get training, and we don’t think they should, as the people who make such important decisions should be experts in working with children and have professional qualifications in this area. Immigration officers have a different job; to enforce immigration control and ensure that people’s asylum claims are properly dealt with. “</p>	

Adam	<p>It was a shocking insight into the lives of young asylum seekers in our so-called civilized country. I've got a question for Francesco...where is the young afghan boy living? In a hostel, on his own, in the care system? And how much money is he given to live on a week?</p>
<p>“We’re really worried about him, he’s not being cared for by an adult. He lives in a hostel on his own and gets £25 a week in supermarket vouchers, that’s all he has to live on. We’re helping him as much as we can, not least to try and get the proper care and support he needs as we think he is a child and he’s not being treated as one. Although of course we hope things will get better for him, we do see a lot of young people in similar situations and of course that’s very upsetting for them.”</p>	

Abby	<p>I was absolutely horrified watching this programme. British immigration officials are responsible for sending this poor woman back to torture. How do officials make their decisions? What are these decisions based on? How much credit do immigration officials give organisations like the Medical Foundation?</p>
<p>“I think a lot of us were horrified, Abby. Only Mary and her legal representative will know the details, but it did mention ‘credibility’ on the programme so we can only assume that the officials didn’t believe what Mary told them about how she came to have her horrific scars. Although Medical Foundation is seen as an expert by the UKBA, they will still make their own decision. We do feel sometimes that people are asked for proof of their experiences when that’s not possible most of the time. “</p>	

Marion	I cannot believe that the young Afghan who has such a cast iron case for protection and who has now been so traumatised can possibly be refused leave to remain. Can you explain what sort of case UKBA will STILL able to make a case in the courts for his removal/deportation.
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“You’re right to say that the courts will be involved, and also people can ask the UKBA to look at the asylum case again if there is new information to back up what they have said. Hopefully, as you say, the compelling evidence will be taken into account, although we often see decisions made on asylum claims that surprise us and seem to come to a completely different conclusion than most reasonable people would. UKBA (and others) assume that if the family is still in the country of origin the child can simply go back and be safe, but that’s often not the case. For years, in many different countries, families have had to make the incredibly painful decision to send their child to another place to make sure they will be safe. This is what happened with the Kindertransport and those of us who have never been in this situation can only imagine how hard this must be. “

@asylumresearch	Great that Clegg announced future end of child detention but what kind of horrid alternative will they dream up for ‘non-compliant families’.
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“I know, that’s how the government describes people who say that they don’t want to go back to their country, usually because they feel that their situation hasn’t been understood or their experiences haven’t been believed.

Well we’re quite worried too, because the ‘alternatives to detention’ projects that have been run in the past have made people very frightened and removed them from the communities that have been giving them emotional support.

It’s not enough to keep telling people what has to happen, the government really needs to listen to the families as well and try to understand the reasons why the family doesn’t want to be removed. “

Lucy	I have heard that sometimes people argue over whether a child is, for example, 14 or 16. Why is it so important to make a fuss over 1 or 2 years if they are still being treated as a child?
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“Hi Lucy, it may not seem important to some people but if you think about it, it’s really really important for lots of reasons. A 14 year old needs to be looked after as a 14 year old and needs to be in school with children of the same age. If you remember when you were 14, can you imagine how difficult it would have been to suddenly be told that you were 16? As well as not being believed, it would turn your whole life upside down. For these children it usually means that they are expected to live on their own and look after themselves, to miss out on school, and that they will be thought of as 18 and be treated as adults all too soon. Even one year at this age makes a huge difference. “