

# Supporting young people leaving care with insecure immigration status

Impact of the Covid-19 Pandemic

January 2021

## Summary of key points

Pandemic-related restrictions placed on services and on everybody's lives have had a particular impact on care leavers with insecure immigration status. The journey that many had been on in terms of building confidence, recovering from trauma and integration in their communities has been disrupted. Many have experienced further practical, social and mental health needs.

Projects have adapted well and quickly to change the nature of their support offer as a result of the pandemic and associated lockdown. However, the challenges posed to support work with young people by the pandemic have been significant. Young people leaving care with history of migration (and some with a history of trauma) have felt the impact keenly in terms of disruption to mental health support, further delays in decisions

around their immigration case, removal of opportunities for social interaction and interruption of their education (for so many, also a source of friendship and support). Projects report greater numbers of destitute young people presenting for support.

Lockdown and associated changes in the ways of working have also produced some benefits. For example, with virtual meetings becoming the norm, projects reported finding it easier to engage with regional and national policy fora; casework support provided virtually has cut down on the amount of travel time for young people; some foster placements have been allowed to continue for longer than they would have otherwise and young people at the older end of the spectrum benefitted from the 'Everyone In' scheme.

# Introduction

In 2018, NCB was commissioned by Paul Hamlyn Foundation (PHF) to carry out research and evaluation with four projects delivered by five organisations working with young people leaving care with insecure immigration status. The research aims to understand the impact of the different approaches tested by the project partners on the outcomes for young people with insecure immigration status who are in transition to, and receiving, local authority leaving care services. Each project operates a different model of support to young people but all have a focus on working to improve outcomes related to immigration status for young people and foreground young people's voice and lived experiences in their support and advocacy work.

The research is designed across six phases of data collection. The fourth phase, which this briefing is based upon, was carried out in late summer 2020, following the first England-wide lockdown due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Our data gathering during this phase was refocused to enable us to learn how the projects are affected by, and responding to, these unprecedented times.

This report is based on interviews with staff at all five projects and three of the five local authorities they work with. It sets out findings related to:

- the impact of the pandemic on young people and their ability to access support
- the impact on the projects ability to deliver and how they've adapted to respond to changing needs.



# Impact of the pandemic on young people and their ability to access support

Unavoidable restrictions placed on services and on everybody's lives have had a particular impact on care leavers with insecure immigration status. The journey that many had been on in terms of building confidence, recovering from trauma and integration in their communities has been disrupted. Many have experienced further practical, social and mental health needs.

Along with many other services, the projects we spoke to have made impressive efforts to adapt their ways of working. Whilst they may not have fully replaced the range of support provided before lockdown, some of these new approaches have provided new tools for services to engage with young people and others working with them.

## Mental health

Mental health continues to be a significant issue for young people during the pandemic. Young people supported by the projects often have Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) which means their tolerance for experiencing further stressful events will usually be lower than individuals without a trauma history. For significant numbers of young people who are supported by the projects, many were beginning their lives in England and feeling settled. They were enjoying college, making friends, and becoming part of a community. For newer arrivals, many were socialising through organised activities and education, but when the lockdown started they had not made

friendships that would continue without the formal nature of a group, so they found themselves quite socially isolated.

Delays to processing immigration and asylum claims were causing additional stress and uncertainty for young people. Home Office decisions on immigration applications had ground to a halt during the first lockdown. From September when the Home Office had started to review applications again, some young people were being declined status, which had a devastating impact.

In one of the cities, it was reported that young people were being stopped by police during the lockdown period while out for their permitted daily exercise due to racial profiling. Projects reported working closely with those young people affected so that the young people would know how to explain their immigration status if necessary when stopped. More generally, some asserted that young people were being unfairly blamed for spreading coronavirus.

## Housing

Being in suitable housing was a key influencer in how young people experienced lockdown, and the projects reported a range of experiences. For some of those in positive foster placements, it was beneficial to be able to stay longer than usual if they would have been due to move on to independent housing. However, some young people had difficulties with foster carers, especially where either the

young person or foster carers were in a vulnerable group and had different feelings about how strictly to follow social distancing regulations. This included cases where the foster carer had to shield as well as relationships between carers and young people breaking down because of young people not understanding the restrictions in place. Under lockdown, changes to placements would only happen in such emergency circumstances. Planned moves due to young people's preferences or age had been put on hold. In one area, a volunteer hosting arrangement where spare bedrooms in volunteers' houses were offered to young people, had to be suspended.

Another issue was young people who had been staying with others informally being asked to leave, due to people they were living with being anxious about the virus. This resulted in stress for the young person and needing to find accommodation quickly.

Young people who are not eligible for local authority care leavers support who had become homeless before or during the pandemic were able to be housed via the Home Office-funded National Asylum Support Service (NASS). Projects have reported that the standards of housing are often very low.

Some young people had benefitted from the national 'Everyone In' Scheme, where 15,000 homeless people were temporarily moved into hotel rooms. This included some older young people supported by the projects. However, in at least one area, project staff had to take more direct action in prompting the local authority to locate and house young people. Projects were also concerned about longer-term housing solutions as the 'Everyone In' scheme was coming to an end. Staff also reported concerns around far-right groups directing intimidation and threats towards hotels housing migrants.

## Education

As reflected generally over lockdown about education provision, young people who were in college experienced varying levels of continued learning and support. Some young people benefitted from being bought IT equipment to enable them to continue participating in schooling remotely. However, not having access to a reliable internet connection was a clear barrier for some young people participating in online classes, and some colleges provided little or no support to continue learning. The young people enrolled were looking forward to returning to college this September, at the time we undertook this round of interviews. Some may have to retake the year because their college did not provide online provision, so that has created frustration and disappointment.

## Health & social care support

Access to NHS mental health services was disrupted during the first lockdown. In one area, all support had moved online. In another area, face-to-face counselling was available in a GP-run centre for migrants, but only for high priority cases. Projects understood that no new referrals to these services were being accepted.

Many of the young people supported by the projects are members of clubs or support groups run by other charities. These include sports clubs which were shut down over the first lockdown. Some support groups, for example run by the Red Cross, were understood to have moved online. In this example, there had been less engagement from young people than for the face-to-face meetings, prompting the merging of several regional groups.

## Immigration status issues and other support provision

When the first national lockdown began in March 2020, the projects were required to

quickly develop alternative approaches to delivery of services to young people. Office-based staff had to start working from home in the majority of cases. At the beginning of lockdown, project teams prioritised reassuring young people that support would be continuing over the phone and through video conferencing technology.

Project staff reported that decision-making in the Home Office in relation to the young people they were supporting appeared to have ground to a halt as soon as the first lockdown was announced. Applications and appeals were not being

progressed and interviews that had already been booked were being delayed. By September, when we carried out interviews for this report, some activity appeared to be restarting. Appointments for interviews were coming through for example, although there was a perception from projects that supported both adults and children that adults were being prioritised. Some project staff observed with frustration national and local reports of immigration enforcement work continuing.



# Impact on project delivery and response to changing needs

All four of the projects are run by organisations with a long history of delivering responsive and flexible support to young people. In the face of the pandemic, therefore, they took immediate steps to ensure the provision of the most appropriate support in changed circumstances. Several foundations, including PHF, awarded emergency grants, which contributed towards the costs of making these changes. This section sets out some of the changes and innovations made.

## Physical spaces and face-to-face delivery

Prior to the lockdown, the services provided by the organisations (casework, one-to-one support, social and activism groups) were primarily delivered face to face. The lockdown meant that much of this work could not continue. The loss of the physical space was mentioned by the projects as one of the most significant impacts of the pandemic, as often the offices provided access to a community and informal support networks for the young people.

For those young people they began supporting after the start of lockdown, it was often more challenging to develop a relationship with them. On the other hand, the flexibility of using technology provided some benefits, such as young people not having to travel for appointments.

In response to reduced access to food, and being unable to run their usual food banks, projects delivered food parcels

to young people's homes. Several of the projects successfully secured donations and volunteer help from local businesses.

A number of approaches were taken to keeping key lines of communication open. As young people became more dependent on their phones for communication – with the projects, other services and their friends and family – the projects purchased more phone top-ups for the young people than usual.

Increased use of secure instant messaging (via Whatsapp) was vital for communication around a young person's immigration case. One of the projects used the platform to transfer official correspondence with young people (from solicitors and the Home Office) where a young person would have usually picked up a physical copy. Another broadcasted 'check-in' messages to young people, reminding them that the project was there to help. This prompted young people to share issues or concerns they were having, which may have otherwise been picked up at drop-in sessions. Two other projects moved drop-in sessions to open spaces adjacent to their normal venue. One was, at the time of interview, trying to secure PPE so that at least some support could be delivered inside.

## Changes in demand and workload

Projects noticed increased demand from individuals who had secured immigration status but without entitlement to welfare benefits and housing support (No Recourse to Public Funds, NRPF) or who had a

temporary form of leave that was due to end. Additionally, some young people who had turned 18 without resolving their immigration status lost their jobs and had NRPF; often these were individuals who had spent some time in care but had not received advice and applied to regularise their status. The precarious situation that these young people were in means they were already at greater risk of homelessness because they do not have the same rights as other young people, but the impact of pandemic meant a greater risk of destitution. Part of the wider support provided by the organisations includes practical support to maintain nourished, safe, and in touch with services and friends. Greater demand for this was seen as a result of the new environment many young people found themselves in, and the increased numbers of destitute young people coming forward. The projects had more capacity to support young people with their situation of destitution because Home Office delays with immigration applications meant there was less immigration casework activity for them to complete.

## Local authorities

The Coronavirus Act gives local authorities the power to opt out of meeting certain statutory requirements in relation to support for children in care and care leavers. We heard about four out of five local authorities' actions in relation to this. Out of these, just one had applied to central government to make use of these flexibilities, but had not, at the time of interview, needed to use them (that local authority considered that they were able to fulfil their duties without the added flexibility). Routines and procedures, for example for visiting young people in their placements, did need to be altered in all areas. In at least one local authority area, social workers were working on a three-week rota – with one week carrying out

visits, one week at home and one week in the office. Projects suggested that local authorities had maintained fairly consistent levels of support for young people before, during and after the first lockdown. Some concern was expressed, however, that visits and other support could not be as responsive as they had been before.

There was reported to be some disruption due to staff sickness around early spring, and one local authority in particular appeared to be affected. Project and local authority staff suggested that some personnel had made the transition to homeworking well. These individuals were reported to be as responsive and engaged with support for the young people, if not more, than before the first lockdown was announced. Project staff suggested that, in general, pre-existing variation between individual social workers and Personal Advisers had continued in the transition to new ways of working.

Senior local authority staff appeared to have continued to develop their relationships with the project teams and engage with strategic elements of the projects. This included correspondence continuing but also meetings moving online. A multi-agency forum set up by one of the projects received higher than usual turnout and engagement, although discussion was dominated by how services were coping in the face of the pandemic.

## Social interaction

Particular effort was made to convert the full social benefits of relevant activities into an online format. Youth clubs and participation groups run by the projects continued to run via zoom. Additional group activities were developed and ice-breaking activities facilitated to support all young people to become comfortable in using the new format socially. The facilitators of one participation group sent out props for games and decorations to



young people's accommodation to use at an online Eid party. Projects noted that some young people made the transition to the new formats more successfully than others, because of differing preferred communication methods. For two of the projects, efforts bore fruit in the form of young people who had struggled to engage with face to face activities (some young people placed out of area and a group of girls) getting more involved.

## **Participation and policy**

The projects have prioritised group activity due to the social benefits to young people, mainly in response to the closure of other avenues of meeting up with friends, for example sports clubs and colleges. One group that successfully

moved online continued with their programme of work, including a survey with young people seeking asylum about their experiences in the UK which led to the production of a research report. One project was able to continue the workplan of their participation group by convening it in their garden. Continuing such work involved breaking down activities into tasks that were more manageable in the new setting or format, and allowing young people more time for socialising.

Projects have used easier access (facilitated by meetings being held online) to regional and national fora to share intelligence and ideas and potentially strengthen the collective voice of their sector in discussions with statutory services and Government.



## Conclusion

The challenges posed to support work with young people by the pandemic have been significant. Although the projects had been able to maintain their contribution to young people's wellbeing throughout this period, there may be further challenges ahead. There are several issues which, unless addressed, may produce a legacy of unmet need over the longer term. Time lost in delayed Home Office decisions could mean more young people still with insecure status when they turn 18. It is too early to tell what

the ultimate impact of restricted social interaction and mental health support will be. Reflections from the project staff, coupled with the fact that a new period of restrictions has been imposed, however, suggest this could be significant. Local authorities will need to remain vigilant and sensitive to the needs and experiences of care leavers with insecure immigration status. They will all need to keep under review how these young people can be best supported in changing and challenging circumstances.

## United for a better childhood

The National Children's Bureau brings people and organisations together to drive change in society and deliver a better childhood for the UK. We interrogate policy, uncover evidence and develop better ways of supporting children and families.

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