



Supporting care leavers with insecure immigration status: Learning on effective support, collaboration and influence

An evaluation delivered by the National Children's Bureau, commissioned by Paul Hamlyn Foundation

Executive Summary
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“ I think that it's built confidence in social workers and personal advisers in dealing with this aspect of the young person's care. ”

Local authority staff member describing the impact of training and advice from one of the projects

“ When I'm coming here... I don't feel alone, I feel like they're stood with me, next to me, they're helping me with every single part of the - they changed my life. ”

Care leaver with insecure immigration status describing his experience of receiving holistic support from one of the projects

Background

Aims and methodology

In Autumn 2018, NCB was commissioned by Paul Hamlyn Foundation to evaluate, over a three-year period, four projects that had been funded to work with young people leaving care with insecure immigration status. Each project was led by a charity or group of charities working in collaboration with the local authority (or local authorities) for their area.

This evaluation explored the approaches of the projects and their impact. Its findings are intended to inform the work of local authorities, charities and their funders in improving support for all care leavers with insecure immigration status.

The methodology comprised a series of in-depth interviews over six phases with young people, project staff and local authority staff. This was complemented by other activities such as a literature review and quantitative analyses.

For more detail on the methodology, see Chapter 2 in the [full report](#).

The legal and policy context

It is estimated that at least 18,934, approximately 15 per cent, of all looked after children and care leavers in England have a potential unresolved immigration status (South London Refugee Association and Coram Children's Legal Centre 2021). Typically, care leavers with insecure immigration status fall into one of three broad groups:

- **Unaccompanied young people seeking protection:** This group includes unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (UASC) and victims of human trafficking.
- **Young people with a non-asylum immigration issue who are not EU citizens:** This group includes young people raised in the UK by their families but who were subsequently taken into care.
- **Young EU citizens in/leaving care:** Similar to the above, these young people may have been taken into care due to concerns about their welfare and have citizenship of an EU country.

Unlike the entitlements of looked after children, those of care leavers are dependent on their immigration status. Entitlements, both to welfare benefits claimed by other care leavers and the legal aid which could help young people resolve their status, are also affected once they turn 18. This means it is particularly important that timely and early support is provided to resolve and regularise immigration status, allowing young people to transition smoothly into adulthood without their welfare being jeopardised.

Findings

Understanding the challenges at hand

Young people supported by the projects, particularly those seeking asylum, faced a wide range of challenges prior to coming to the UK which continued to impact on them when they arrived in the UK. Whilst many of these young people expressed positive aspirations to contribute to society, experiences of traumatic events in their home country or on their way to the UK impacted on their coping mechanisms and their ability to engage in a timely manner with key immigration processes to resolve their status. These challenges were further compounded with a range of others including:

- A lack of trust in authorities;
- Inconsistent quality of legal representation where solicitors did not spend enough time considering young people's language needs or their understanding of the process; and
- An inability to work and/or the limited availability of opportunities to engage in educational or social activities often resulting in young people suffering from poor emotional health and wellbeing.

“ I want to be something in the future. I want to enjoy my life here and then, yes, help with other people as well, with the communities and everything else, as much as I can. ”

Care leaver with insecure immigration status describing their aspirations for their future in the UK

The challenges faced by young people are discussed in more detail in Chapter 3 of the full report.

Local authorities faced a number of challenges in providing support to young people. These included:

- Identifying young people who needed support, including recognising the need for support for unaccompanied young people who had only been granted leave until the age of 18 (known as UASC leave) and, in particular, identifying those who, despite being taken into care from their families in the UK, still had unresolved immigration issues. This emphasised the need to intervene at the earliest possible opportunity to prevent their rights to work and/or receive benefits (as detailed above) from being negatively impacted; and
- A lack of detailed knowledge amongst social workers and personal advisors of how to interpret asylum and immigration law provisions alongside a lack of confidence amongst these professionals in providing support.

“ if you're only dealing with perhaps one asylum seeker in a caseload of 18... you might struggle to have the time to know what you need to know in order to be able to support them, and... it's such a life-changing thing ”

Local authority staff member describing the challenges of maintaining the knowledge needed to support care leavers with insecure immigration status

The challenges anticipated at the beginning of the evaluation in relation to joint working between projects and local authorities are discussed in more depth in Chapter 4 of the full report.

In response to these challenges, project and local authority staff identified two key areas to focus the collective efforts of the projects, namely:

- Provide specialist casework and immigration advice (or making appropriate referrals) to fill any gaps in existing provision; and
- Deliver holistic support to young people to help them adjust to their new environment and develop resilience and coping mechanisms.

In delivering the above, the projects sought to collaborate more closely to improve capacity in local authorities and promote early intervention. They also aimed to provide opportunities for young people with experience of insecure immigration status to inform the policies and practices that affect them.

How the projects supported young people

Projects provided a range of support to young people and worked in a number of ways to help meet identified needs:

- **Expert guidance to navigate the immigration and asylum systems:** All project staff teams collectively had a high level of knowledge and expertise on the legal requirements and processes required at each stage. The projects employed Office of the Immigration Services Commissioner (OISC) accredited advisors, either at levels 2 or 3, to ensure they could do this effectively. This was particularly useful for non-asylum-seeking young people with insecure immigration status, as the appropriate routes to settlement were generally less commonly understood and relevant processes even less familiar for social workers. Projects also supported young people to get the most out of their legal representation by aiding communication with existing solicitors or referring young people to new high-quality solicitors. Such referrals to new solicitors were made if the young person's existing representation was poor quality or their advice needs required a higher level of accreditation than the projects could provide.

“ They are helping us; they're telling us our rights, what rights you have as a youngster, what rights you will have as adults and grown-up adults, what rights you will have in this country. They're telling us all the things. ”

Care leaver with insecure immigration status describing the support they received from one of the projects.

- **Building trust with young people:** Significant effort was invested by project staff in maintaining regular email, phone and face-to-face contact with the young people they were supporting. Project staff made young people aware of their project's independence from statutory bodies which helped to address power imbalances between staff and young people and further build trusting relationships.
- **Accommodating communication needs:** Projects provided translation services to translate written materials into the young person's first language wherever possible and provided interpreters for specific meetings. Group and peer-to-peer work was also utilised to aid information sharing.
- **Supporting young people's mental health:** Project staff took a number of steps to address the impact of trauma on young people including: showing understanding, flexibility and patience around time keeping (which was particularly important given the lack of structure in many young people's lives); providing a safe space for young people to share their experiences when ready;

providing information and advice to promote good mental health self-care and; identifying when further mental health support may be needed.

- **Provision of holistic support:** Projects provided advice to young people on a range of practical issues such as cooking, travel and managing relationships with housemates. They supported young people to access social and educational opportunities and health services. This also included helping to secure better support from the local authority, by informally advocating on the young person's behalf or making formal challenges in public law. This is discussed further below. Service provision, particularly in terms of the community and voluntary sector, varied considerably between local authority areas. This impacted on what projects themselves needed to provide to young people. Abdel's story, below, gives an example of holistic support.

The projects' approaches to working with individual young people are discussed in more detail in Chapter 3 of the full report.

Abdel's story

Abdel was 21 years old and appeal rights exhausted when he was referred to the project by the local authority. He arrived unaccompanied in the UK when he was 17. Although he had found a college course he was keen to start, he could not undertake the placement part of it because he did not have a National Insurance number. He was also struggling to engage with his course because of his mental health and he was facing destitution.

The project helped address Abdel's mental health needs: Firstly, by supporting him to make a GP appointment and get some medication; secondly, by talking to the trauma therapy service to re-accept him on to its list after he had been removed due to non-attendance.

Abdel's project support worker also spoke directly with staff at the college who agreed that he could sign up to do the course as a volunteer. After further work by the project, alongside the college and a public law solicitor, it was confirmed that this arrangement would be consistent with Home Office rules on work and Abdel was able to commence his course.

Abdel is now 25, feels settled in the UK and has a network of friends. He continues to access support for his mental health. He remains engaged with the project, attending social activities, and has an ongoing positive relationship with his support worker. They are continuing to support Abdel with his immigration status, gathering evidence from his trauma therapist and GP, which they submit to the Home Office every few months.

How the projects worked with local authorities

Projects worked with local authorities in a number of ways to meet the needs of young people including through:

- **Training for professionals and carers.** Over the course of the evaluation, projects collectively provided training to several hundred professionals. Strengths identified by local authority staff included: tailoring of content to the existing levels of knowledge of particular teams; contextualising information in relation to local services and communities and to refer to relevant local authority policies, and; signposting to ongoing advice provided by the projects. Local authority structures (such as whether they had a dedicated team for these young people) and the pressures they faced (such as high staff turnover/increasing numbers of vulnerable children) affected the extent to which local authority staff took up projects' initial offers of training and advice.

“ *The team said it was really helpful... We've had other providers come in and do immigration training, and I think sometimes... It's just gone over their head... They don't have to know what the legislation is. They just have to know the right questions to ask.* ”

Local authority staff member comparing a project's training to that of another provider

- **Advising social workers and PAs on individual cases.** Whilst this 'second tier support' was not a feature of all projects initially, its significance grew as more young people with insecure immigration status were identified by local authorities, not all of whom could be directly supported by the projects. Local authorities welcomed the accessible and responsive guidance offered, which played a particularly key role in supporting many young people through the EU Settlement Scheme.
- **Coordinating support for individual young people,** particularly in terms of ensuring the holistic support offered by projects complemented the day to day corporate parenting responsibilities of local authorities. Project staff were vigilant to the potentially blurred boundaries between their roles and that of young people's social workers and aimed to maintain clear lines of accountability. This was important for particular tasks such as age assessments as these were often challenged by projects. This was also important in terms of ensuring that demands on projects' time were manageable. In this sense it was only partly effective, as project staff were better placed to provide some aspects of support particularly for young people who had absconded from care in another area and were not yet on the caseload of the local authority.
- **Making formal challenges to decisions.** Project staff supported (or in the case of one project, directly represented) young people in challenges to local authorities in public law, primarily in relation to the conduct of age assessments. This potential source of conflict was managed well by project and local authority staff who recognised such challenges as a legitimate and separate activity to their day to day work together, which could bring about improvements in local policy and practice.
- **Advocating informally on behalf of the young person,** using interactions with young people's social workers and personal advisors to highlight needs and suggest how the local authority may be better able to meet them. David's story, below, sets out an example of how a local authority was persuaded to take a more active role in supporting a care leaver with their immigration status. Whilst such informal advocacy contributed to young people's outcomes, and was often welcomed by local authorities, in some cases it disrupted the projects' and young people's working relationships with local authority staff.
- **Advising on local policies and processes.** Local authority staff welcomed input from the project staff on the design of local policies and processes, in particular those in relation to identifying non-asylum-seeking young people who may need support around their immigration status. The extent and effectiveness of this collaboration evolved over the course of the evaluation as relationships strengthened.

- **Acting as partners in a community of practice.** Working relationships between project and local authority staff developed to such an extent that they were able to engage in regular meetings and information sharing exercises to support the development of each other's practice. This way of working was particularly critical in collaborative efforts to identify and support young people through the EU settlement scheme.

“ Feedback from the PAs and social workers is that... having that opportunity to troubleshoot [is] worth its weight in gold [because if] you can go online, it's a minefield sometimes to try and pinpoint what you need to do... with a certain case. ”

Local authority staff member describing the informal guidance offered to members of their team by one of the projects

Approaches to collaboration between projects and local authorities are further explored in Chapter 4 of the full report.

David's story

David was referred to the project by his Personal Advisor. His birth family, who originated from a commonwealth country in the Caribbean, had tried to regularise his immigration status but their numerous applications had failed. The local authority did not take action to address his status whilst he was in care.

David had recently served a prison term but was not being released because of his immigration status. The project worked with him and another specialist organisation to secure his release on bail. They discovered that the Home Office were planning to deport David and advised him and his PA that he would need to appeal against this. The project staff successfully applied for Exceptional Case Funding through legal aid to take this forward. They also referred him to a solicitor and supported him and his PA to engage with the process and produce relevant evidence of his family life.

The project persuaded the local authority that a social worker should visit David's family home and write a statement on his situation to contribute to his case. The statement included their observations and professional opinion on his character, how he has reformed after prison and his family life. Project staff were optimistic that this would help to make a strong case to avoid David being deported from the country where he grew up.

How the projects involved young people in making change

Projects organised a range of activities to give young people a voice. These activities adhered to good practice in meaningfully engaging young people. Key elements of good practice observed included:

- **Audience, influence and agenda setting.** Project staff reported that, in general, their participation

activity had a clear purpose and pathway to impact. In practice, this included setting up sessions in partnership with local authority colleagues to inform specific local policies, for example, and co-producing documents about young people's experiences that were then used by project staff in their influencing work.

- **Allowing time and space to identify the right approaches.** The projects establishing new activities were cautious and patient in their approach. Whilst this was partly a case of allowing young people to gradually build confidence and trust, we also heard of steps taken to listen to young people's feedback on this journey to understand what works for them.
- **Flexibility to account for diverse and changing needs.** The onset of the pandemic and associated restrictions had significant ramifications on this aspect of the programme. Examples of how this was addressed included adapting group activities so that they could be delivered online or in outdoor spaces, and increasing time allocated to ice-breaking activities, to mitigate the lack of opportunities for socialising under lockdown.
- **Providing opportunities for young people's longer-term benefit.** Projects offered activities that could provide young people with transferrable skills such as mental health self-care, English language skills and experience of exercising agency.

“ *Probably one of the main [outcomes] is just how it feels to be in control of the process at a time in your life when you're not in control of much... I think [this] has a really positive wellbeing effect and improved confidence.* ”

Project staff member describing the impact of exercising agency for the young people's wellbeing

- **Consideration of young people's best interests and wellbeing.** This was done through a combination of reducing the potential risk the participation activity may pose to a young person's welfare, and accepting the fact that some young people were not in a position to take part. That some young people struggle to engage appeared to be partly due to the nature of the activities that were arranged. For example, group activity may be more challenging for those who are struggling with their emotional wellbeing, and some young people struggled to think beyond their immediate support needs whilst their project support worker (rather than a separate person) was coordinating participation activities.

This activity relation to involving young people in making change, and how it relates to the existing evidence base on good practice, is described in Chapter 5 of the full report.

Impact on young people directly supported

Young people benefitted from the support provided by projects helping them to understand their rights whilst supporting them to engage in informal support networks and access education and training opportunities. Combined with the range of holistic support described above, all of this contributed to improving young people's mental health and wellbeing. Young people themselves saw the role of the projects as transformational, and local authority staff working with them saw noticeable improvements in young people's wellbeing.

“ *He is just noticeably less stressed since he got his decision.* ”

Local authority staff member describing the impact on a care leaver of getting their immigration status resolved

Based on analysis of the cases of young people referred in the first half of the evaluation period¹:

- Overall, 90% of young people had made substantial progress towards resolving their immigration status. Of these, 40% were granted refugee status or humanitarian protection within the evaluation period.
- Based on analysis of data from NRPf connect² we were able to confirm that, on average, those young people who were granted these statuses, did so more quickly than young people in other local areas.

Later in the evaluation period, projects worked with local authorities to identify and support many non-asylum-seeking care leavers with their immigration status, including supporting many successful applications to the EU Settlement Scheme.

More detail on the impact projects had on young people, including from analysis of changes in immigration status and from testimony from young people themselves, is set out in Chapter 6 of the full report.

Impact on policy and practice

Evaluation evidence found that collaboration with local authorities had led to improvements in their policy and practice, including:

- **Changes to local authority policies and procedures.** These included,
 - ▷ the establishment of dedicated local authority teams for working with care leavers with insecure immigration status
 - ▷ formal policies on supporting these young people and on supporting those who were also victims of trafficking
 - ▷ public commitments to supporting young people who wish to apply for British citizenship
 - ▷ changes to local authority routine data collection on children in care to include nationality, helping identification of those who may need support in relation to their immigration status
- **Improved knowledge and confidence** of the many children's social care staff the projects worked alongside, advised and provided training to in relation to immigration and asylum issues
- **Improved understanding** amongst these staff of how the experiences of this group of young people may impact on their day to day needs and behaviours, reflected in better initial assessment of needs without the need for further advice or intervention from the projects.

These findings in relation to impact on policy and practice are set out in more detail in Chapter 7 of the full report.

1 These are a limited cohort of young people who consented to share information with the evaluation team.

2 NRPf Connect is a voluntary database that local authorities can upload data to regarding the support they are providing to people with no recourse to public funds. During the evaluation period, 32 local authorities submitted data to the database on care leavers who fall into this category.

Impact on costs to local authorities

This evaluation highlighted the ways in which the projects helped to avoid significant support costs for care leavers which would normally have been borne by local authorities. Based on a selection of 8 scenarios that unfolded for young people supported by the projects, we estimated these potential cost savings. These range from:

£7,191 – for one young person who was an EU citizen but not identified as such promptly, incurring legal and Home Office fees as well as needing support with accommodation and subsistence for a short time whilst his case was resolved;

£101,111 – for one young person who came to the UK with her birth family aged 6 but needed support with accommodation and subsistence for five years, as she had been advised to take an unnecessarily lengthy route to settlement in the UK.

If these figures are multiplied by the number of young people with insecure immigration status supported by local authorities, the potential cost savings are significant. Local authorities, with the support of charities, can avoid the vast majority of these costs by acting early to address young people's immigration status before they turn 18.

“ *The accommodation costs and the subsistence costs are astronomical... So, it's... a no-brainer for local authorities.* ”

Local authority staff member describing the importance of acting early to resolve young people's immigration status

We heard from project and local authority staff that there were also wider potential cost savings for local authorities. These included more efficient management of young people's cases informed by training and advice from project staff and reduced support needs of young people as a result of action to improve their wellbeing.

Based on the policy, practice and cost impacts described above, most project and local authority staff saw potential for the commissioning of the projects by local authorities in the future. They suggested that this would need to be a bespoke offer of support based on the responsibilities and priorities of the local authorities as well as key elements of the current projects.

For more detailed findings on potential costs avoided through the work of the projects, including all 8 of the cost scenarios and how these were calculated, see Chapter 8 of the full report.

Implications of the findings

The evaluation identified a number of overarching learning points for local authorities, charities and funders looking to further develop support for care leavers with insecure immigration status:

- **Recognising, accepting and responding to the evolving nature of individual young people's needs:** Given the time it takes to develop trusting relationships and effective participation work, charities and their funders should plan for impact to be measured over a longer period. Local authorities should ensure continuity in social worker support for these young people.
- **Flexibility in response to local context:** Charities developing future work in this area should consider how the structure of local authority teams and pressures faced locally may affect the

training needs and take up, and how the availability of other voluntary and community services available locally may inform the design of a holistic support offer.

- **Clearly defining roles within a multi-purpose, multi-agency team:** Charities and local authorities should work to clearly define the roles of their staff so that young people see a clear separation of their day to day advice and support, both from decision making about their entitlements (such as age assessments), and from group-based activities to influence change.
- **Challenging policy and practice professionally and through agreed channels:** Charities and local authorities should maintain dedicated fora at strategic and practitioner levels to share insights and solutions. The evaluation found that this was more constructive than advocating informally for young people on an individual basis, which sometimes disrupted relationships. The time needed to develop relationships through these fora should also be considered by charities and their funders in terms of the timescales across which it may be reasonable to see impact on policy and practice.
- **Potential for commission by local authorities:** There is a case for most or all of the projects' existing activities to be commissioned by local authorities across England as a key part of meeting their corporate parenting responsibilities. The reception and impact of training and advice for local authority staff suggests that these activities should be considered a valuable part of charities' offer, in addition to their one to one advice and casework with young people. Charities may want to consider developing a specific offer that responds to local authorities' interest in early intervention to ensure care leavers immigration issues are addressed before they turn 18. Funders may support this by having designated funds for early intervention initiatives. This would support collaboration whilst not interfering with charities' role in supporting older or absconded care leavers for whom local authorities may not have recognised responsibilities.
- **Addressing barriers at a national level:** This evaluation identified the impact that systemic issues in children's social care, such as staff turnover, constrained resources, and fragmentation of responsibility between the local authorities of England, are having on support for care leavers with insecure immigration status. To address this, the Department for Education should work with local authorities and charities to secure:
 - ▶ more collaboration and coordination between local authorities in supporting young people with insecure immigration status, so that a more consistent offer of support can be delivered. This includes areas such as Kent where more unaccompanied young people arrive in the country;
 - ▶ adequate funding and workforce development, so local authority staff have the capacity and skills to support these young people to access the expert guidance they need, when they need it; and
 - ▶ collaboration between local authorities and specialist charities, so that the social capital and distinct expertise of the voluntary and community sector can be used to complement and improve local authority support for these young people.
- **Building the evidence base:** There are two main areas of inquiry that could further contribute to evidence-based practice in this field. Funders should consider supporting research to explore these in order to inform good practice, as well as their own and local authorities' investments, in the sector.
 - ▶ engaging with a larger number of local authorities to understand the impact of local context, on the best approaches to effective collaboration to support young people.
 - ▶ building on this evaluation's approach to developing cost examples by applying this methodology to a larger, representative, sample of young people and creating a robust cost-benefit analysis.

These implications are discussed in more detail at the end of the full report. Recommendations for local authorities, charities and funders, are summarised in the table overleaf.

Summary of recommendations for local authorities, charities and funders

Area of learning from evaluation	Recommendations for local authorities	Recommendations for charities	Recommendations for funders
Recognising, accepting and responding to the evolving nature of individual young people's needs	Ensure continuity in social worker support for care leavers with insecure immigration status		Take into account time needed to build relationships with young people and develop effective participation activity when setting time over which impact is measured
Flexibility in response to local context		Consider how local authority structures and pressures may affect training needs and take up; how local community and voluntary services may inform holistic support offer to young people	
Clearly defining roles within a multi-purpose, multi-agency team	Clearly delineate decision making and day to day support roles, agree this with partner charities and communicate this to young people	Clearly delineate day to day support from group-based participation activity and communicate this to young people	
Challenging policy and practice professionally and through agreed channels	Maintain fora at strategic and practitioner level to share insight and solutions with charities and their staff	Maintain fora at strategic and practitioner level to share insight and solutions with local authorities and their staff	Take into account time needed to build relationships with local authorities when setting time over which impact is measured
Potential for commission by local authorities	Consider commissioning training and advice for local authority staff as well as one to one case work and advice for young people	Develop an offer for local authorities focused on early intervention to resolve immigration status before care leavers reach age 18	Consider dedicated early intervention funding to support charities to develop this offer, whilst protecting work with older care leavers
Building the evidence base			Consider funding: Research across many local authorities to explore impact of local context on best approaches; cost benefit analysis building on cost examples in this evaluation

Conclusion

Overall, this evaluation has demonstrated a range of innovative approaches that projects have adopted in working with local authorities and other stakeholders to intervene early to help resolve young people's immigration status. It has shown how projects have worked hard from the start to secure young people's trust. As well as showing high levels of flexibility and understanding, projects provided a range of practical support to help manage and mitigate the impact of any trauma that young people might have experienced prior to, or when, they reached the UK.

Projects worked closely with colleagues in local authorities, supporting and advising them on individual cases, as well as enhancing knowledge and building relationships leading to improved policy and practice, and cost savings for local authorities.

There is much that other charities, local authorities and other key stakeholders can learn from this evaluation. Most importantly of all is the lesson that early intervention and enhanced collaboration between projects and local authority staff can help to maximise the chances of young people's immigration status being resolved on a timely basis. This means that the life chances of many more young people will be greatly enhanced through better access to education, housing and other services so vital for mental health and wellbeing.



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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