

Uncertain futures

Children seeking asylum in Wales

Summary Report



Uncertain Futures provides a unique and powerful account of the circumstances of young asylum-seekers in Wales. The report highlights the resilience and courage of children who have suffered persecution and conflict in their countries of origin and been subject to privation and fear on their journeys to Wales. It reflects on the ‘Welcome in the Hillside’ that refugee and asylum-seekers receive from the people in Wales but also paradoxically the pernicious racism and harassment that children seeking asylum frequently suffer. It outlines a number of very encouraging aspects of service provision in Wales but also identifies gaps in provision and areas of concern.

Save the Children commissioned a team from the Universities of Glamorgan and Cardiff to undertake qualitative research with children, young people and with professionals working in this field. *Uncertain Futures* presents the views and experiences of asylum-seeking children and of professionals regarding life in Wales and service provision in the key areas of education, health, housing and social services. We believe this study should provide a basis for a thorough review of current funding, policy and practice as they affect asylum-seeking children in Wales and trust that it will help child welfare organisations to be better able to advocate on behalf of asylum-seeking children in Wales.

Children seeking asylum in the UK are first and foremost children. Save the Children believes that in line with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child 1989 decisions about asylum-seeking children should be in the child’s best interests and applied without discrimination. Asylum-seeking children are vulnerable and in need of care and protection; moreover, they are a potential asset to our society and not a burden. All policy as it affects asylum-seeking children in Wales should reflect these key principles.

The UK policy context is fast changing. There is an increasing gulf between legislation developed to protect children and the reality of immigration policy and practice. Immigration and asylum are policy areas that are non-devolved; however, provision of the majority of services that asylum-seekers in Wales receive is the responsibility of the Welsh Assembly Government. The report concludes with a number of recommendations for policy-makers and service-providers.



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Key findings

Asylum-seeking children in Wales

The number of asylum-seekers in Wales fluctuates weekly. This poses particular difficulties for service-providers trying to plan services. There are additional difficulties with regard to children, because the available data does not identify the numbers and ages of children being dispersed to Wales. The research reviewed the information available but we are still unable to sensibly estimate the size and character of the child asylum-seeker population in Wales.

There are two specific groups of children under the age of 18 seeking asylum in Wales who are provided with services in different ways. First, accompanied children are those children living within a family unit, who in the main are supported by the National Asylum Support Service (NASS). These children are ‘dispersed’ to Wales from other areas of the UK. The second ‘group’ of children are separated (unaccompanied) children under the age of 18 who do not have an adult relative or guardian in the UK. Although this group is subject to UK immigration policy via an almost identical process, they are supported in a different way from children in families. These children remain the responsibility of the local authority in whose geographical area they seek help.

The most recent figures indicate that as of October 2004, there were 2,232 asylum-seekers dispersed to Wales. The number of children is not identified, although we know that among this population there were 510 families with 1,435 dependants (some of whom will be under 18). In 2003 it was estimated that 70 separated (unaccompanied) children were being looked after by local authorities in Wales.¹

The majority of asylum-seeking children in Wales, whether separated (unaccompanied) or arriving with a caregiver, are settled in one of the four dispersal areas in Wales.² However, there are also very small numbers of asylum-seekers (including children) in each of the other 18 local authorities in Wales.

Coming to Wales

Safety is given as the main reason why children and their families or separated (unaccompanied) children left their country of origin. The research suggests that many of the asylum-seeking children in Wales have experienced significant conflict and persecution and lived through horrific events. Since arriving in the UK, some children and young people have experienced a number of moves before arriving in Wales. For children this has meant enrolling in new schools and making new friends. Some professionals highlight concerns about the ‘trafficking’ of children, whereby children are brought to the UK for the purpose of exploitation. However, the true extent of exploitative trafficking is difficult to gauge.

¹ Figures supplied by the Welsh Local Authorities Consortium for Refugees and Asylum Seekers.

² Cardiff, Newport, Swansea and Wrexham.

Living in Wales

Local communities are seen as welcoming of asylum-seekers but over one-third of the 47 children and young people interviewed had experienced racial abuse and harassment. Respondents are of the opinion that the media in the UK fuels negative perceptions of asylum-seekers.

Education is very important to children seeking asylum. School provides an opportunity for them to meet other children and make friends, and they are keen to excel in their schoolwork. Children spend much of their spare time studying and are cautious about participating in leisure activities. For separated (unaccompanied) children over 16 (who have limited access to mainstream education opportunities), social integration is more difficult.

Under current legislation, asylum-seekers are not allowed to work. Young people (aged 16–18) and parents express considerable frustration about this. Language is a major barrier to asylum-seekers. Most of the key services across the four dispersal areas in Wales use interpreters but often children are required to interpret for their parent's solicitors and for some health or medical services.

The negative effects of poverty and isolation are considerable. Asylum-seekers are disadvantaged by a lack of support networks, inexperience of budgeting in the UK and an absence of local knowledge about where to shop and how to get access to services and support. Payments to asylum-seekers under the current system are sometimes subject to delays.

Thoughts of the future are difficult for young asylum-seekers in Wales because of the uncertainties they face. Virtually all young people said that they felt they were in limbo and were anxious about their future.

Service provision

Refugee and asylum-seeking children need the services that all children need and have a right to: somewhere to live, an education, healthcare, support and guidance. In addition, many will need specialist services, such as: therapeutic services to help children deal with the trauma they have suffered before coming to the UK; assistance in learning English and understanding the culture and mores of the society in which they now live; and legal advice and support on immigration issues.

The report provides an overview of service provision in each of the four dispersal areas and identifies encouraging signs of good practice and areas of concerns relating to education, health, housing and social services. Cross-cutting messages about service provision are supplemented by identification of the specific issues regarding services for children living in families and for separated (unaccompanied) children.

Constant legislative changes pose significant challenges to those working in the field, as does the complexity of the policy area. But generally, there are optimistic messages about service provision for young asylum-seekers in Wales. Children and their parents are positive about the treatment they receive.

Wales is seen to be at a disadvantage in relation to England and Scotland in terms of specialist services because dispersal is relatively new and the numbers of asylum-seekers are low compared with those in England. Specialist staff within mainstream services are seen as a better model for promoting integration for asylum-seekers than separate, specialist services.

There are a number of very **encouraging aspects of service provision** for children seeking asylum in Wales, including a generally warm welcome and multi-agency forums operating across the four dispersal areas. Positive factors are:

- specialist nurses
- mental health provision (in one cluster area)
- health provision
- some specialist education provision
- mentoring programmes
- innovative procedures for providing practical and emotional support for new arrivals are in place in one cluster area.

Areas of concern include:

- problems with the dispersal system: the effects of children being moved
- lack of school places (especially for children with special educational needs)
- lack of healthcare and support networks
- lack of up to date and accurate information on asylum-seeking children in Wales
- inconsistency in both public and private housing
- the placing of some separated (unaccompanied) children in hotel accommodation
- delays with payments
- racism and harassment, aggravated by the lack of positive imagery in the media.
- the long wait for decisions, leaving parents, children and young people anxious and uncertain about their future
- lack of expertise and specialist services or specialist staff
- patchy provision of interpretation services
- lack of proactive inclusion within mainstream services, for example, in youth services, access to healthcare for people who are refused asylum, and access for the over-16s to schools.

In addition issues particular to children in families include:

- inadequate family incomes
- children taking on responsibility for caring for siblings and for interpreting for parents
- wider protection issues to do with domestic violence, parent–child conflict and the need for cultural sensitivity in handling childcare/protection issues.

Issues particular to separated (unaccompanied) children include:

- age disputes
- limited mainstream integration
- lack of emotional support
- some poor-quality housing and shared accommodation arrangements
- lack of post-16 education resources
- some single males are struggling to look after themselves and they are also at particular risk of racial harassment.

Implications for policy and practice

Over the past decade the development of policy as it affects asylum-seeking children in the UK has been ever changing and, arguably, has had an increasingly punitive impact. Against this backdrop, the development of services in those parts of Wales most affected has been rapid.

Save the Children continues to campaign at the UK level for:

- the removal of the reservation to Article 22 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child
- an end to the detention of asylum-seeking children
- a legal duty to ensure that every separated child has a guardian
- a policy commitment not to return children to the country of origin or a third country unless this is in the child's best interests
- the care and protection of children who have been trafficked being of paramount concern in determining their legal status.

Uncertain Futures identifies key messages for policy and practice in Wales and concludes with a number recommendations, the majority of which are targeted at the Welsh Assembly Government, local authorities and other commissioners and service-providers in Wales.

Recommendations

Statistical information on asylum-seeking children

- The Welsh Assembly Government should take responsibility for co-ordinating an accurate statistical overview of the situation in Wales, including taking action to ensure that the relevant agencies in Wales are supported and enabled to access and make use of the National Register for Unaccompanied Children (NRUC).
- The Home Office and NASS should ensure that accurate and useful data on children in families is provided to local authorities and other service-providers prior to dispersal.

Review of funding and provision for Assembly-controlled services, eg, health and education

- Welsh Assembly Government should review funding arrangements for health and education services in Wales for asylum-seeking children and their families.
- In the context of the proposals to establish a National Service Framework for Children, Young People and Maternity Services in Wales (NSF), the Welsh Assembly Government should lead a comprehensive review of public service provision for asylum-seeking children across Wales and develop policy and practice guidance in relation to children seeking asylum in Wales that is underpinned by the Assembly Government principle of social inclusion.

Child trafficking

- The Welsh Assembly Government should set up a multi-agency all-Wales trafficking group to develop protocols for identifying and responding to suspicions of child trafficking and to develop training programmes to raise awareness of trafficking concerns among the relevant agencies.

Separated (unaccompanied) children

- Local authority social services should pay immediate attention to accommodation issues for separated (unaccompanied) young people and in particular the need for local foster placements.
- The Welsh Assembly Government, advised by the Children's Commissioner for Wales, should consider how best it can ensure the provision and availability of accessible, specialist and well-funded independent advocacy support for separated (unaccompanied) children seeking asylum in Wales.
- The Welsh Assembly Government should establish a system of guardianship to ensure that the best-interest principle is maintained and that separated children are supported through the asylum system.

Health

- NASS should consider the healthcare needs of children and any individual needs when decisions are taken about dispersal of asylum-seekers.

- Health services in Wales should ensure that all arriving asylum-seeker children have a health assessment by a specialist nurse and access to a ‘catch-up’ medical to promote equity with the local population.
- Commissioners of health services should ensure the provision of a range of (and access to) mental health services for asylum-seeking children, including specialist services.

Education

- The Welsh Assembly Government should confirm longer-term funding of special needs provision for asylum-seeking children based on a review of need.
- The Welsh Assembly Government should examine current arrangements to ensure that post-16 education and training can be offered to all asylum-seeking children aged 16–18. College programmes should include English as a Second or Other Language and examination and vocational courses, as well as training in independent living skills.
- All schools should operate a ‘zero tolerance’ policy on racist bullying and provide real opportunities for children to report bullying and victimisation. The implementation of the policy should be regularly monitored with reference to children themselves.
- Schools should encourage and support asylum-seeking children to make use of out-of-school activities.

Youth and community and leisure services

- Youth and community services should consider what they can provide for asylum-seeking children and young people (by way of additional provision or outreach to mainstream services) taking into account the wishes of eligible children and young people living in the area.
- Leisure services should consider ways in which they can make leisure facilities more accessible to asylum-seeking children (and other children from low-income households), for example, by giving them a card that provides free access.

Housing

- Housing providers should ensure that the weekly checks on families are carried out sensitively.
- Local authority housing departments should support social services in discharging their statutory duties and ensuring the provision of appropriate supported housing to separated (unaccompanied) young people aged 16–18 and those eligible for Leaving Care support beyond that age.

Poverty

- All asylum-seeker families and separated (unaccompanied) children should be treated on the basis of equality with the general population in terms of welfare benefits.
- Service-providers in Wales should ensure that families and separated (unaccompanied) children receive support and advice on living on a low income.

Staff capacity

- The Welsh Assembly Government and service-providers should ensure that frontline staff across Wales are kept up-to-date with changing legislation and guidance.
- The Welsh Assembly Government and service-providers should ensure that staff working with asylum-seekers receive training including specialist training on child protection and asylum (for example, on cultural issues and on trafficking).
- The Welsh Assembly Government should establish a post of an all-Wales specialist adviser for practitioners, not least to assist and support staff working outside of the dispersal areas.
- The Welsh Assembly Government and service-providers should ensure that frontline staff receive training in working with interpreters.
- The Welsh Assembly Government should consider agreeing and applying standards for the use of interpreters.

Save the Children UK is a member of the International Save the Children Alliance, the world's leading independent children's rights organisation, with members in 27 countries and operational programmes in more than 100.

Save the Children works with children and their communities to provide practical assistance and, by influencing policy and public opinion, bring about positive change for children.

See www.savethechildren.org.uk for more details.

Copies of the full report are available from:

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