Submission of Evidence for the Inquiry into asylum support for children and young people

About The Forum:

The Forum (Migrant and Refugee Communities Forum) was formed in 1993, in response to the needs of newly arrived refugee and migrant communities, as well as those that had settled in north and west London. A registered charity, The Forum is user-led and works to promote the rights of refugees and migrants in the capital.

The Forum's work practically addresses the social exclusion of refugee, migrant and ethnic minority communities. The Forum brings together those with different migration experiences, origins, cultures and languages, to work together towards common goals; be it access to legal advice or petitioning policymakers, holding cultural events or running supplementary schools, fighting deportation or starting a charity, writing a blog on an issue of common concern or studying for a qualification verification exam. We also advocate strategically for change to national policies with the overall aim of achieving equality for all.

The underlying purpose of all these activities is meaningful integration into British society.

Our submission:

1. Is there any evidence of the effects of income poverty on children’s development, well-being and their life chances? If so, what are the effects?

From our experience of delivering casework support to individuals and working with migrant and refugee community organisations, children's development is greatly affected by income poverty forced on young asylum seekers and families. In the case of several unaccompanied asylum seeking children, they are given £35 per week for food but this is both an extremely low amount and difficult for young people to budget. Consider the long term planning a young person must navigate to decide whether they should buy a warm jumper for winter or a few bags of rice. Several clients turn to our advisors for help because they are not being supported to make these types of budgeting and saving decisions elsewhere. This directly affects the well-being and health of children and families.

Young people's development is inhibited by the current level of income poverty because it closes off learning and education opportunities. Most courses require a fee which these children do not have. Some take advantage of free one-off classes, like the those offered at The Forum. Although useful, these courses rarely end in a qualification and do not integrate migrants with the mainstream.

There is also very poor advice and guidance being given by social workers to young asylum seekers. One of our clients has been entered in English language classes for four years but these classes are leading nowhere. Rather than placing him in a vocational class that would lead to a qualification and an employable skill, he has spent years trying to perfect his English. Of course, language is an important factor to integration but his development has been stifled and his life chances erased because he has no qualifications, no employable skills and only a low level of English.
2. The government’s stated objective for the asylum support system is that it provides for the ‘essential living needs’ of those who would otherwise be destitute. In your view is this currently the case and please explain your reasoning with references to any evidence or examples.

An individual can survive on £35 per week but it is a diet of rice, beans and canned food. It is difficult to explain what this is like for months in a row. Counting out the lack of nutrient rich foods, the monotony of the diet is depressing. Also remember that it usually ends up being less than £35 per week because some of this is spent on transportation or other essential needs like clothing or communication (topping up mobile).

Individuals also struggle with isolation because the ‘essential living needs’ do not begin to cover transportation. Young people and families cannot afford to travel by bus or tube to other parts of the city. Many walk hours to attend meetings. As a charity, we must reimburse travel expenses if we want to serve our clients because they cannot afford to travel for legal advice sessions or English language classes.

Another area that is ignored within ‘essential living needs’ is that of mental health. Social workers often devise care plans for young asylum seeking children that include housing, education, and health plans, but neglect to include proper support for their mental health. In the case of many young asylum seekers, the trauma from their experiences makes them especial vulnerable with mental health concerns.

3. Are the current levels of support provided to asylum seeking children and families adequate in meeting the needs of children and young people? Please explain your reasoning.

No, the current level of support is not enough. An adequate level of support would take into consideration the increase cost of living, cost of transport and other needs that those who have no other support networks and/or many belongings need to start and lead a normal life with dignity. This would greatly support the individual to use other services, seek out lower cost items, connect with mental and physical health services, and be able to socialise to reduce isolation and improve their mental health.

The current level of support forces children and families to choose between eating proper meals and having warm clothes. Or choosing between hot meals and a bus pass to go see their psychiatrist. These types of choices are impossible to make and leave children and families in an extremely vulnerable condition.

Another example of insufficient support is maternity payments for parents seeking asylum. It is currently at £3 more per week while pregnant, £5 more per week once the baby is born until age one, and £3 per week until the baby is three years old. (See: http://languages.refugeecouncil.org.uk/pdf/English/Maternity_payments_English.pdf) This amount is insufficient to meet basic needs. Anyone who has children knows that it is impossible to provide for a baby on this meagre additional payment.

The level of ‘Integration Loans’ is also insufficient amount. This loan is intended to pay for a deposit on housing, help to furnish a flat, and to help resettlement but it is only available to fully recognised refugees. The amount is not sufficient to cover a deposit in London, let alone fill an empty flat with the things necessary to live.

4. Is the accommodation provided to asylum-seeking families effective in keeping children safe and promoting their welfare?

Accommodation varies widely from case to case. The most extreme example we have encountered was the case of one 17 year old unaccompanied asylum seeker who was placed in a flat with no electricity or hot water for over a month. Both the landlord and social worker were contacted but left the boy in such dire conditions. Since then he has been moved three times making his living conditions very unstable. He is very isolated and does not trust the system that should be helping him.

We also have examples of flats that are provided completely bare. There is no bed, no cooker, no cutlery and it often takes a long time to apply and get welfare grants or earn enough to furnish properties so children and families are forced to live in substandard conditions, which can lead to trauma and isolation.
5. Does the current asylum support system enable children in asylum-seeking families to have a standard of living adequate for a child’s physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social development? Please explain your reasoning.

No. The asylum seeking children and families we see, especially those who live with their parents in NASS accommodation, face poverty and destitution that is imposed on them by very low level of financial support and they suffer from anxiety, isolation and are often stuck in limbo with no right to work or education for years. It is obvious to us from the families who come to us for help that children are suffering because their parents cannot provide for them and will grow up scared and stifled by this experience.

6. Does the current system have any impact on children’s long term outcomes and opportunities in the future?

It is not difficult to imagine the long term impact of deprivation and trauma of growing up in poverty and on the margins of society. Asylum seeking children are still burdened by the responsibility to care for parents who do not speak English and frequently asked to interpret for parents in unsuitable situations.

Often, young people miss out on opportunities to study or work experience because their home-life is so unstable. Either because of lack of funds or because the current asylum system discourages integration, young people growing up in the asylum system often feel as though they do not have the same opportunities for the future as their peers. This has effect their long term outcomes because they do not have the same opportunities to obtain qualifications and gain work experience.

7. How does the current support system affect families where there is a child or parent with a disability?

The asylum support system is especially difficult to access for parents with disability. The case of Child EG in Westminster shows the gaps and holes in support with tragic consequences. In this case, the mother, who fled an abusive husband, appears to have struggled to maintain her health and the health of her children upon leaving NASS accommodation. The mother was seen by nine health professionals and was still left without support and without help for caring for her two children. Later, a rare brain infection rendered her unconscious and her 9 months old son starved to death and just two days later she passed away too.

This is an extreme case which points to the complete failure in part by the asylum support system to successfully transition this very vulnerable family. We frequently work with individuals who are left destitute and homeless after being given immigration status of some form as they have 4 weeks to leave NASS accommodation.

For more information on the case of Child EG, see serious case review:
http://www.westminster.gov.uk/services/healthandsocialcare/familycare/safeguardingchildren/serious-case-reviews ;
www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2012/oct/05/immigration-children; and www.guardian.co.uk/society/2010/mar/24/baby-starved-death-london.

In addition, confusion around NHS entitlements and lack of proper information and guidance for both NHS staff and asylum seekers, in many cases creates unnecessary barriers in to access health care. For example, one of our clients, who is an asylum seeker, and has mental health problems, gave birth to premature twins and was told by NHS compliance officer in the hospital that she has to pay for the blood tests for her 3 month old twins or they will not show her the results of the test. The situation was resolved only because our advocate went with her to the hospital and stood up to the NHS compliance officer. On her own, our client was too vulnerable to respond.

8. Are there any other circumstances where children may be particularly adversely affected by the levels of asylum support?

We have encountered some cases in which families are being separated geographically because the parents are divorced. In one case, the father was on Section 4 and placed in Cardiff while his ex-wife and children were based in London. He is unable to visit his children often and is not able to regularly participate in their lives. If he lived in London, he would be an active parent. This negatively effects the support environment for children and flexibility should be made in the system to accommodate divorced or separated parents.
9. What is the impact on children and parents of the fact that parents are not allowed to work?

Parents often struggle with self-esteem and mental health because they are not allowed to work. Fathers have reported to us that they feel useless and unable to provide for their family. They feel like their talents and skills are being wasted and they feel like they cannot be appropriate role models for their children.

One father came to The Forum because he was felt he was wasting away. He just wanted to use his skills as a mathematician and his children didn't know what his profession was. He has been a volunteer teacher for a maths course at The Forum for the last two months but wishes he could teach in a school. This is an example of how not being allowed to work negatively impacted his family. He was only able to overcome this by volunteering in the community.

Not being permitted to work causes widespread de-skilling over the years in the community, not just the family. In the past, The Forum provided training support for refugee and migrant doctors who were preparing for verification exams. One young asylum seeker we supported commented that: “If it is this hard for doctors to be able to work, what can I expect?”

10. Are there any concerns about the current administration of the asylum support system with relation to children?

We are deeply concerned about administrative practices within local authorities of splitting families who are refused asylum seekers. One family was offered £35 per week to support the mother and two children and a place in a shelter. The father was turned away and made homeless. First this is an unacceptably low stipend to provide food for three people. Additionally, it is detrimental to the family and the children's development to split the family and force the father to sleep rough.

Another example, as we describe in Question #8, is that of families being separated across Section 4 support because the mother and father are divorced. This has impacted the well-being of the children because their father is unable to regularly participate in his children's lives.

11. How often do you see families with no financial support whatsoever?

We have seen three families in the last year with no financial support. They survive on handouts and good will of people in their community.

12. Are there any concerns about the use of the Azure payment card in relation to children?

We have encountered examples of exploitation because of the Azure card. Individuals have told us that they have purchased vouchers using the Azure card and arranged to exchange these vouchers for cash in order to buy bus passes, cheaper food or clothing for their children. When exchanging the vouchers with individuals in the community they are taken advantage of and given cash for significantly less value (£20 cash for £35 worth of vouchers). The inflexibility of the Azure card forces parents into risky situations which could put the well-being of the children for that week.

We also know of cases in which the family have received refugee status and given the typical 28 days to leave NASS accommodation before their financial support ends. But in one case the Azure card was stopped after only one week and in another case the final week were allocated 75% less than expected. This puts families and children at risk of homelessness, poor health and nutrition.

13. Do you think there are any adverse effects of increasing asylum support levels for children and families? Would greater levels of support attract greater numbers of asylum seekers or migrants?

We have encountered no evidence to believe increasing support levels would attract more asylum seekers. Not one of our clients has ever known the details of level of support before coming to the UK. None of our clients have ever suggested they came to the UK because of welfare support. The myth of the welfare pull factor for asylum seekers has been debunked successfully by researchers and campaigners over the years and the government has never produced any evidence that welfare is indeed a pull factor.
We view the current level of support as a form of forced destitution for asylum seekers and their families. Increasing support would not have a detrimental effect on numbers; rather it could allow the UK to finally have a humane standard for those seeking sanctuary in our country.

Finally, the cost of support could be reduced if asylum seekers were allowed to work, pay for themselves and contribute in the form of income tax. The benefit of allowing asylum seekers to work for their self-esteem, mental health, confidence and dignity would be priceless.

**Statement of Truth**

I believe the facts stated in this witness statement are true.

Signed

Date: 7th December, 2012
Appendix I: Report on 'Safeguarding Refugee Youth'

Each year, hundreds of children arrive alone in the UK and seek asylum. These children are known as unaccompanied asylum-seeking children, and they enter the care of children's services until they turn 18. Most do not receive refugee status but discretionary leave to remain—which often ends at 17 1/2. What happens when these young people turn 18 and no longer have a system of support?

The Forum recently published a report, 'Safeguarding Refugee Youth', that works to provide a perspective on the lives of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children in the UK. The report introduces the topic, provides case studies of former unaccompanied asylum-seeking children, examines current problems, and provides recommendations for policy and practice changes.

We've included this report as a supplement to the evidence submitted above. The report also includes a detailed recommendations section. The report can also be accessed on our website at the link below: http://migrantforum.org.uk/category/safeguarding-refugee-youth/

Safeguarding Refugee Youth:

- Turning 18 in the Asylum System

- The Good and Bad of Leaving Care

- Problems with Current Practice

- Conclusions and Recommendations
  http://migrantforum.org.uk/safeguarding-refugee-youth-conclusions-and-recommendations/
Turning 18 in the Asylum System

Turning 18 and becoming a legal adult is a significant transition for all children. This transition is multiplied when one is leaving Social Services’ care upon turning eighteen—and it’s even more difficult when the young person is not officially a citizen.

Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (UASC) is the term most frequently used for young people under the age of eighteen who arrive without families in the UK to claim asylum. In 2010, 1,595 unaccompanied young people applied for asylum in the UK, most of whom were 16 or 17 years old. These children come from all over the world and have traveled dangerous journeys over land and sea to get to the UK. The top countries of origin for separated children are Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran, Eritrea, and China (including Taiwan). These young people are a major group within the care of Social Services—and they remain especially important when it comes time for them to transition out of care.

Upon arriving in the UK and submitting an asylum claim, most young asylum seekers enter into the care of the local authority in which they applied for asylum. Asylum claims are usually processed within 35 days and end with either the granting of refugee status or refusal of refugee status. If refugee status is refused, discretionary leave to remain or humanitarian protection may be granted to the applicant. Most UASC are granted discretionary leave to remain, which is typically for three years or until the child is 17½—whichever period is shorter.

Young asylum seekers are usually placed in a foster home if they are under the age of 16. While 16 and 17-year-olds may be placed in foster care, it is more common for them to be put in semi-independent accommodation (i.e. living in a hostel or group home). Financial support varies based on which local authority the separated child lives in, and whether or not the young person is working. Most separated children attend school in their local area, frequently after spending time in English courses. Though being separated from their families is tough, most separated children in care have the support needed to begin new lives in the UK.

Although discretionary leave to remain can be extended and refugee status denials can be appealed, most of these changes happen at or around when they turn 18, making legal adulthood even more complicated. Frequently the young person’s legal status is in doubt upon leaving care, forcing the young people and their advisors to come up with multiple plans based on the different possible outcomes in status. These plans are referred to as “pathway plans,” and if status is in doubt, there are usually three different possibilities for the young person leaving care.

To view a presentation about the three possibilities, view the report online at:

The Good and Bad of Leaving Care

Transitioning out of care by Social Services is difficult no matter the situation of the 'looked-after-child'. Unfortunately, the transition out of care is smoother for some young people than it is for others. Much of the difference seems to come down to the separated child's immigration status at 18 and the connection between the young person and her social worker.

To understand two very different experiences of turning 18, I interviewed two young men who had recently been through the transition. Their names have been changed to protect their anonymity.

Positive Experience: Ahmad, 18

Ahmad is originally from Afghanistan and has been in the UK since he was 14. He just turned 18 in May, so he hasn't gone through all of the changes that accompany legal adulthood yet. Ahmad is currently enrolled in college in Newham, which he attends from 9-5 each day. His status is still in question, so he’s applying for another visa for temporary leave to remain because his previous visa ended when he turned 18.

Ahmad traveled from Afghanistan by himself. Once in the UK, He stayed with a cousin's family while they helped him get access to social services and enrol in school. When he turned sixteen, his social worker offered him housing and Ahmad decided to move out of his cousin’s apartment since there were only 2 bedrooms and 10 people sleeping in it.

Ahmad spoke highly of his social worker, who he said works very hard to help Ahmad with life in the UK. Other social services that he has received include housing, his solicitor, and education. Ahmad actually found a solicitor before a social worker and then his solicitor found a social worker for him.

Ahmad hasn’t seen much of the transition yet because it has only been a few months since he turned 18. Thus far he’s remained with the same social worker who helped him to apply for benefits upon turning 18. He is receiving support as a student and his college has let him stay. Ahmad said that his social worker was a huge help in the process of applying for these benefits.

Ahmad’s social worker has been deeply involved in general, and Ahmad says his social worker “works very hard for [him].” After Ahmad turned 18, his social worker had Ahmad meet with the 18+ team whom he will eventually transition to, and told him that the transition to that team would begin six months after he turned eighteen.

In the future, Ahmad hopes that he will be granted formal refugee status and be able to stay in the UK permanently. After finishing college, he plans to go to university. He’s considering studying business but has no firm plans yet.
Negative Experience: Benjamin, 20

Benjamin came to the UK from the Democratic Republic of the Congo at age 16. He initially received a one-year visa which was extended while he was still a minor. Eventually Benjamin’s application for asylum was denied, so he does not currently have a formal status within the UK.

Benjamin’s journey from the DRC was an arduous one. His journey began by taking a bus to Kenya, then another bus to Ethiopia, and finally a plane from Ethiopia to the UK. He stayed with another adult from the DRC for a couple of weeks upon arrival, who then took Benjamin to the Home Office to apply for asylum. Benjamin was placed in foster care and received benefits while in care, including a social worker, tuition for college, housing benefits, and a pass to a gym. Upon arrival, Benjamin started English classes. Once his English was at a high enough level, he began attending college.

Unfortunately, the life that Benjamin had been building in the UK changed dramatically shortly after he turned 18. His social worker completely failed to prepare him for the differences that would come along with becoming a legal adult. After Benjamin’s eighteenth birthday, his social worker started telling him that things would change--a far cry from Ahmad’s experience of being prepared in advance. Benjamin was not transitioned to an 18+ team due to lack of legal status in the UK. Instead, he was simply told that two months after his eighteenth birthday, all care support would stop.

When his benefits ran out, Benjamin didn’t know where to turn. His housing, food, and college support were all stopped, and Benjamin was out of resources. He ended up staying with a friend, who helped support him until he came to The Forum, where our social worker found Benjamin a place to live. Benjamin had difficulty finding emotional support in this time period, as well--he only had a couple of friends who were asylum seekers, so most of his peers did not understand what he was going through.

Benjamin thinks that the Home Office should continue to support people until they turn 21, so that later arrivals like him can finish college and have a real chance at finding a job. He tried to return to college this year, but is not receiving education benefits and unable to pay. Benjamin hopes to return to college and eventually attend university in the future, and eventually wants to work in media. [toggle]

Listen to Benjamin talk about what the hardest parts of turning 18 were for him:


Conclusions

Much of an unaccompanied child’s experience upon turning eighteen depends on individual circumstances. As Ahmad’s experience shows us, a positive relationship with his social worker has made all of the difference in the world. Miscommunication and lack of understanding by social workers, on the other hand, can lead to situations like Benjamin’s. It is imperative that those working with separated children who are becoming legal adults recognize this and work to make their communication clear, inform themselves about all the options, and prepare children for the transition ahead.
Problems with Current Practice

There are many problems faced by unaccompanied asylum-seeking children who turn 18. A large number of the issues these young people face are due to structural flaws within the system. We will identify some of the most pressing problems in this section, and examine what difficulties they cause in the lives of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children.

Lack of training for social workers

Social workers are the frontline of the UK’s interaction with separated children. They are the government employees with direct interaction with these young people. Unfortunately, some social workers with asylum seekers on their caseload have pointed out that it is hard to stay up-to-date with immigration and benefits system as these entitlements change frequently. Those social workers looking after separated children are not being given the specialist immigration training they need to be effective advocates for their clients.

An example we found was with a young person whose social worker did not understand his immigration status and struggled to get access to other services. Later the social worker found out that he had been granted refugee status and should have had full access to services the entire time.

Complex guidelines for who is entitled to support

Young people whose appeal rights have been exhausted are in perhaps the most precarious situation of all. Though they have legally been denied asylum, for one reason or another they have not been removed from the UK. These young people are living in the UK unable to legally work—but who is responsible for them?

While unaccompanied asylum-seeking children are under 18 and in care, the UKBA provides reimbursements to the local authorities. Section 4 of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999 places the responsibility for support after 18 on the local authority without the UKBA reimbursements. Since the UKBA generally ceases reimbursements three months after these young people turn 18, the burden for any continuing interaction is placed on the local authority.

The situation becomes even more confusing when examining which young people local authorities are required to support. In many cases, ceasing support requires a Human Rights Assessment but there is no singular protocol in place for this assessment. Furthermore, the criteria used to determine whether a young person should receive continuing support are sometimes nebulous (i.e. ‘face practical obstacles to returning to their country of origin’), making local authorities even more confused on whether they should be providing support.
The bottom line for social workers should be that local authorities are responsible for ALL young people including those who could become destitute when they turn 18. If the UKBA is unable to deport these 18 year olds, then the local authorities still have a responsibility to support them. It is not the role of local authorities to become immigration officers.

**Withdrawing support leaves UASC at risk of destitution**

In practical terms, one of the most terrifying aspects of the confusion surrounding support to people who have exhausted their appeal rights is that refusing support leaves these young people at risk of destitution. Without the ability to work and without access to benefits, it is difficult for these young people in particular to find a way to stay afloat. These young people are at risk of homelessness and destitution. This problem is related to confusion surrounding who is entitled to benefits. However, the problem is broader and rooted in the shirking of responsibility by local authorities to provide for all residents in their region. Forcing 18 year olds into destitution should not be the policy of local authorities or the UKBA.

**UKBA provides less money for care leavers**

When the UKBA does provide benefits for some unaccompanied asylum-seeking children leaving care, those benefits are not always enough to provide full financial support for the care leavers. Payments for care leavers are less than the amount given for looked-after children, intensifying the gap in available money to live on. The UKBA provides £150 per week for care leavers, which must cover all costs including accommodation, living expenses, education, and other expenses. Even when benefits are being received, the local authority may not provide for a care leaver at the same level as when they were in care. This can significantly damage the young person's plans in education and for their future.

**Lack of specialist legal knowledge**

Legal representatives for asylum-seeking children must be well versed in child law as well as immigration and asylum law. Most separated children are placed with immigration solicitors, who may or may not have dealt with an asylum seeking child before. There are very few solicitors who work exclusively on children's immigration cases, so most separated children are placed with solicitors who do not specialise in this area.

**Conclusions**

While there are many problems in practice for helping unaccompanied asylum-seeking children, the five outlined here are the most urgent. One common thread through each is confusion on how the law applies to UASC, demonstrating the disconnect between the people making the laws and those navigating through the system--asylum-seekers, solicitors, and social workers alike.

These young people are not criminals or benefit-scroungers looking to live for free-- they are children who fled violence and war, grew up in care in the UK, and are now being forced into destitution. Officials at the UKBA and within local authorities cannot turn a blind eye to the impact of their confusing policies and lack of communication. They are responsible for helping to transition these children when they turn 18 and destitution is an unacceptable outcome.
Conclusions and Recommendations

Over the course of this report, we have examined the lives of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children in Britain as they turn eighteen and become legal adults. The previous sections laid out the most pressing problems facing these young people, including confusion on their entitlements, insufficient training for social workers, and lack of specialist legal knowledge. Here we will outline some potential changes that could make leaving care easier for unaccompanied children.

1. Formal system of guardianship

One of the most discussed issues surrounding separated children is whether the UK should establish a formal system of guardianship for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children. In this context, a guardian is known as someone who helps separated children through the asylum process by accompanying the child to different visits, helping to plan the child’s future, and simply serve as a person on the child’s side. A guardian could help separated children transitioning to adulthood by serving as an advocate and someone who would be able to offer explanations throughout the process.

A pilot program for guardianship, the Scottish Guardianship Service recently completed its second year in Scotland. Though it is still small in scale, the program has thus far been received fairly positively by the agencies that it interacts with. The Scottish Guardianship Service currently plans to continue offering guidance from guardians to former separated children over the age of 18—a service that would be much appreciated by the care leavers as other services are cut. Guardian appointment would also bring the UK into better compliance with the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, which calls for all children to have guardians.

2. Extend support until 21

Perhaps the simplest solution is for all care leavers—regardless of immigration status—to be provided with support from the UKBA through local authorities until the age of 21. This would include young people who have exhausted their rights of appeal, who generally have the fewest resources available to them. The Children Society’s report “I Don’t Feel Human Anymore” suggests that leaving care provisions could become available by amending Schedule 3 of the Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act 2002. Though care leaver provisions would be a simple way of providing for all separated children in transition, the cost involved and the current attitudes in the Home Office makes support for this proposal unlikely.
3. More extensive and frequent training for social workers

One of the major problems identified in the previous section was training for social workers. Immigration policy is extremely complex and continuously changing, making it difficult for social workers to keep up-to-date with its many intricacies. Giving social workers who work with separated children specific and frequent training on immigration policy and updates would be greatly beneficial for both the social workers and the separated children they work with. Knowledge of immigration policy and the related benefits would be especially helpful as young people turn eighteen and attempt to transition out of the system.

4. Government guidelines for local authorities

One practical suggestion that could significantly decrease gaps in provision for separated children turning eighteen is for the central government to create guidelines for local authorities on how to support young people who have exhausted their rights to appeal. Ideally the government could provide specific guidelines to local authorities about when young people are entitled to continued support, UKBA policies on providing support for young people, and other provisions of law that might affect former unaccompanied asylum-seeking children. Government-issued guidelines would establish a protocol for separated children leaving care and therefore provide something for social workers and young people to follow when navigating an extremely confusing system.

5. Improve access to advice

One major cut by the Coalition government has been in legal advice for immigrants and refugees. Many legal aid clinics and free legal advice programmes have been forced to close and those that are still open are overwhelmed with clients. In addition, most immigration cases do not qualify for legal aid now. As pointed out in the last section, most solicitors who do not specialise in immigration law as it applies to children. Additional training could be provided for solicitors who work with unaccompanied asylum-seeking children.

At The Forum, we often see people who have nowhere else to turn. Over the last two years, we have seen an increase in the demand for advice because so many other advice centres have closed. With changes everywhere in the benefits system, it is difficult for most people to navigate, let alone unaccompanied children turning 18. The government should acknowledge the important role of advice in solving problems before they start and in correcting errors made by government incompetence. Advice provision could be improved for former unaccompanied asylum-seeking children by increasing the funding and availability drop-in advice centres like The Forum.

Conclusions

The transition period for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children leaving care is fraught with misunderstanding and constant change. All young people becoming legal adults someday but this group faces special legal, physical, and emotional challenges that are difficult to navigate on their own. In many ways, the system that is supposed to provide support is failing them. Of course, many social workers, solicitors, and other advocates are helping these young people survive but this is not a long term solution. The Home Office and local authorities need to take some of these practical steps to improve the lives of these former separated children, and now is the time to do so.