

GETTING IT RIGHT FOR SEPARATED & UNACCOMPANIED

CHILDREN IN SCOTLAND - Briefing paper 1

Over the last few years there has been increased media and political coverage of migrants journeying across the Mediterranean and other routes in an attempt to reach Europe. This movement of people is one of the largest the continent has seen in its history. One feature has been the growing number of unaccompanied children among those reaching Europe's shores. Up to one in three of the arrivals are children (UNICEF 2016), and the number of unaccompanied or separated children seeking asylum on an individual basis has increased significantly, reaching the highest levels since UNHCR started systematically collecting such data in 2006 (UNCHR 2016).

The recent UNICEF report regarding the situation of lone children, or unaccompanied minors, living in camps along the coast of the English channel, highlighted multiple sources of possible traumatisation prior and during to the journey to Europe. This included, but was not limited to, the experience of violence and conflict, trafficking, sexual and physical abuse, sexual exploitation, forced participation in illegal economic activities or the experience of inhumane and degrading living conditions (UNICEF 2016). Precarious living conditions, the failure to have access to schooling or regular occupational activities directly impact on the psychological health and mental frailties of children who may have already been traumatised before and during their journey.

This resonates with the extant literature, which highlights the potential vulnerabilities of children on the move and unaccompanied asylum seeking children and the numerous challenges they face in home countries, on the move, when they arrive and as they adjust to living in a new country (Kelly & Bokhari 2012; Hopkins & Hill 2008; 2010; Rigby 2011; Kohli & Malthur 2003; Raghallaigh & Gilligan 2010). These challenges are often compounded by the legislative hurdles imposed by nation states on migrants and the at times limited ambivalence of destination countries (UNICEF 2016).

Research has highlighted the challenges for practitioners and policy makers in responding to children on the move, in addition to the conceptual issues in relation to the framework of understanding – what do the terms 'migrants', 'children' and 'refugees' effectively translate into? The programme will synthesise the Scottish experience to date (see Hopkins and Hill 2008, 2010; Crawley & Kohli 2012; Rigby 2011; Rigby & Whyte 2013; Sime 2016; Forbes & Sime 2016), with international experience and young people's voices to focus on the challenges for separated children in a changing Scotland and an increasingly anti-migrant UK.

While there has been some academic work in Scotland, there has been little during the present policy and legislative context of the 'forced' dispersal of children (see Home Office 2016), nor in the new reality created by the global mass movement of people. The experience of local authorities in Scotland of working with separated children is developing, and they are building on many years of experience of working with vulnerable children. This knowledge and experience is invaluable; however, we cannot assume that it can be uncritically applied to care for children who may have additional and/or different needs due to their

‘unaccompanied’ status. Despite evolving practice in Scotland there has been little opportunity for reflection on the development of responses regarding the needs and experiences of separated children who arrive in the country. Aspirations to prioritise a human rights model to work with separated children within a wider discourse of ‘vulnerable people’ on the move has frequently been overtaken by law enforcement, border control priorities and media hyperbole.

A coalescing of expert voices, from lived experience, professionals, policy makers and academics at this crucial juncture in Scotland’s emergence as a nation state, and at a time of intense media and political scrutiny in relation to separated children, will bring a reasoned and evidence based debate to influence future thinking on the issue. The proposed programme aims to synthesise existing knowledge and find new ways of determining the best way to take forward collaborative responses to meeting the needs of unaccompanied children and young people and harnessing their collective skills.

The programme will provide the opportunity to explore the various ways unaccompanied minors are framed within policy and guidance, a framing that informs understanding and responses. In this context, the programme aims to identify existing systems in place to support and work with separated children and the policy, practice, legal and conceptual frameworks around this. At this time in Scotland, when the country is looking to assert its own identity within the UK and Europe, the programme is particularly relevant in exploring how Scotland can provide a more welcoming and supportive environment for children on the move. The programme will move beyond the simple categorisation as ‘migrants’ or ‘refugees’ and focus on the rights and needs of children.

The main aims and objectives of the proposed programme are built around two key questions:

1. What are the conceptual, definitional and political issues that affect understanding of the needs and motivations of children on the move?
2. What national and international legislation, guidelines, knowledge and evidence underpins current responses and support for separated children?

By locating the movement of children in a theoretical framework of global, political and economic development and local responses the programme aims to:

- bring together Scottish, UK and international participants who have been involved in work with separated children and the development of evidence based service provision
- explore the factors that promote and hinder the development of effective support for children on the move
- identify models of good practice that can begin to inform policy, practice, research and learning to provide effective responses to the needs of separated children in the Scottish context
- develop an international network of expertise to foster knowledge exchange that links Scotland into global experience and developments

The first event on the 30th November and 1st December 2017 aims to set the scene for Scotland in the international context by looking at the broad legislative and human rights framework, before discussing the policy response and experience in Scotland to date. Lived experiences of young people and carers will inform the first day. The second day will provide a European perspective in terms of patterns of migration, experiences of children and specific country viewpoints, before discussing the UK national transfer scheme. There will be opportunity for discussion and questions as part of the iterative nature of the programme.

The second event on 22nd and 23rd February 2018 will look at various national and international responses and highlight some of the challenges and good practice from various jurisdictions. The third event on 26th and 27th April 2018 will bring together the learning and begin to identify the next steps for Scotland.

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