

**REFUGEE WEEK from 15<sup>th</sup> -21<sup>st</sup> June it is Refugee Week, bringing an opportunity for our campaign to come into focus. Refugee week is a UK-wide festival celebrating the contributions, creativity and resilience of refugees.**



## **Distress Signals – Campaigns Briefing**

### **1) Key Information**

This youth led campaign is calling for the Government to introduce independent guardians for all unaccompanied and separated children and young people. Independent guardian schemes are provided to all unaccompanied children in Scotland and Northern Ireland but not in England and Wales. In Scotland and Northern Ireland, a guardian is allocated to a young person upon arrival/presentation to an organisation or referral, to the scheme provider. The guardian supports the young person from start to end of their asylum/immigration journey.

Youth-Led Commission on Separated Children (YLCSC): A group of young people supported by The Children's Society have come together to campaign for this change. The YLCSC members are experts by experience. They had to struggle through a complicated asylum system that controlled their choices, freedom and future. They are now determined to use their knowledge and experience to campaign for a change they know will make a huge difference to the lives of all unaccompanied children.

#### **a) What is the problem?**

A member of the group summarised the issue affecting unaccompanied minors seeking asylum in England:

*“Unfortunately, following their arrival in the UK, unaccompanied young people continue to face significant barriers. This is because the government policies that have created the hostile environment have made it more difficult for young people to access NHS services and education.*

*Children need someone to explain the immigration process and support them through it, as it can take so long. For many of us, it can be years and years of waiting.*

*Many of us don't understand what our solicitors are saying, even when there is an interpreter speaking our language. We don't understand the process and how it works as it sounds so complicated.*

*We need someone to come with us to solicitors' appointments, home office interviews and appeal hearings. We don't have family with us. Our social workers have many other young people and they can't come to everything with us. Sometimes social workers tell us that we needed to do it by yourself and to learn to become independent.”*

#### **b) Why is this important right now?**

From 15<sup>th</sup> June-21<sup>st</sup> June it is Refugee Week, bringing an opportunity for this campaign to come into focus. Refugee week is a UK-wide festival celebrating the contributions, creativity and resilience of refugees.

The current covid-19 situation has shown organisations and individuals that the most vulnerable in our society need support to thrive. The YLCSC feels the role of a legal guardian is needed now more than ever to bring hope to young people's futures.

### c) **Who is affected?**

*“We know that a significant number of separated young people fleeing war, persecution and other struggles take a range of difficult journeys to arrive in the UK.”*

Unaccompanied young people, separated children and young people will frequently experience issues such as violence, family breakdown, bereavement, exploitation and torture in their lives prior to arriving in England. The further barriers they have to securing their right to stay here (refugee status) can therefore be incredibly detrimental to their mental health and wellbeing. Creating or exacerbating mental ill health.

### d) **What are we calling for?**

This powerful group of young people are calling on the Government to give all separated children an independent guardian. This guardian would provide direction and guidance for these children as they go through the process of applying for securing their refugee status. A member of the group explained why a guardian would be so beneficial:

*“Having a guardian would help as they could support us with speaking to our solicitors, explain our situation, explain what applications we have done. A guardian is someone that works with local authorities, legal services and other organisations to help unaccompanied children and young people access assistance they need and to make informed decisions about their future.”*

They also discussed the positive impact a guardian could have on mental health and wellbeing:

*“Going through the asylum process without support really impacts on your mental health and well-being. We need guardians to support us with our mental health by helping us understand what is going on and supporting us when we have questions. We need someone by our side along the asylum journey.”*

*A guardian can also introduce a young person to social opportunities and begin to integrate them into the community, such as enrolling them to college and other youth groups, showing them the city and teaching them how to do shopping and buy clothes and listen to them and complete their basic needs.”*

## **FAQs**

### **What is the difference between an Asylum Seeker and Refugee?**

- An asylum-seeker is someone who has fled their own country and is seeking sanctuary in another country, where they apply for asylum (the right to be recognized as a refugee and receive legal protection and material assistance). Not every claim is guaranteed to be successful.
- A refugee is someone who was an asylum seeker and has managed to be successful in being recognised as a refugee. In other words a person who meets the eligibility criteria under the applicable refugee definition, as provided for by international or regional instruments, under UNHCR's mandate, and/or in national legislation.

### **What are Guardians and what do they do?**

- Guardians in Scotland support young people in a holistic way to meet the needs of the young person they are working with, this involves:
  - ➔ Explaining what the asylum process is, providing support at meetings (including with social workers, at Home Office interviews)

- ➔ Supporting with daily day to day life skills, access to services and who is who in the young person's life (i.e. solicitor, social worker, key worker)
- ➔ Providing support understanding information (i.e. after Home Office interviews)
- Guardians also provide a constant point of contact for young people going through this process. This crucially means unaccompanied young people will not have to explain their story to several other people or professionals which can be incredibly traumatic.

### **Why can't social workers do this?**

- This is not support that a social worker can provide because they often do not have the training to support young people through immigration and asylum processes. They also do not have the capacity to provide the long-term support that young people need.
- Having someone who is independent of social care and other agencies is also important. This can help to prevent any conflict of interest arising and make sure the young person is represented fairly. For example, if a social worker is involved in assessing a young person's age, a conflict of interest may arise, as the outcome of the assessment will determine whether or not the young person will be supported by the social services team (as they will only be eligible for support if assessed as under 18).

### **How can I help?**

The YLCSC group have launched a petition calling on the Home Office to provide a guardian for every unaccompanied minor. You can sign the petition [here](#).

Please also share the petition amongst your family and friends, as well as on your social media platforms. If you can get five family members or friends to sign up you will be helping the campaign immensely.

You can also support the campaign by watching the documentary and sharing the group's [online hub](#) amongst your networks.