

The BASW Immigration Asylum and Trafficking Special Interest Group response to the New Plans for Immigration

BASW (The British Association of Social Work) is an independent professional membership organisation for social work, providing advice, support and guidance to social workers in the UK. As a condition of membership, all social workers subscribe to the [BASW Code of Ethics](#), which is based on the [definition of social work](#) by the International Federation of Social Work. The Code of Ethics is underpinned by a respect for human rights and a commitment to promoting social justice and its values based on respect for the equality, worth and dignity of all people. Meeting human need, developing human potential and working with those who are disadvantaged to promote social inclusion are fundamental to the profession. It is from this perspective that this response is written.

The BASW IAT SIG

The IAT SIG (the Immigration Asylum and Trafficking Special Interest Group) comprises of social workers in BASW with specialist, significant experience knowledge and insights related to separated and accompanied migrant children and their families, as social work practitioners, managers, policy advisers, educators and academics in this field of practice. We believe we are therefore well placed to provide an enhanced response to this consultation process and write from a position of being well informed. The SIG has therefore in addition to contributing the broader BASW response, some members also completing the on-line questioner on an individual basis, decided to submit this stand-alone collectively drafted document. The SIG has much synergy with the work of SWWB (Social Workers without Borders) and supports the contents of the SWWB briefing <https://mailchi.mp/5a82e158f5e4/swwbs-newsletter-take-on-the-new-plan-for-immigration?e=cffb0cdc06>

The SIG believes that there is a theme running through the document that misunderstands and/or misrepresents the ethics, standards, roles and work of social work. This is explained and evidenced our response.

The Consultation Document, process and Information sharing.

NPI (The New Plan for Immigration) is a complex set of proposals issued on March 24th with a 6 week consultation on period. The SIG believes this is not a length of time for meaningful consultation. Social workers are overwhelmed with work demands and require longer than this to fully consider and respond to the proposals. The timescale we believe has not provided an adequate time for the profession to respond taking into consideration this is in addition to undertaking the 'day job'.

Members of the IAT SIG have been pleased to attend a series of consultation meetings, with the wider NGO sector, with the Home Office and Ministry of Justice. These meetings provided significant information in addition to the NPI issued on March 24th. This information is not supported by written documentation, at times it was inaudible and speedily delivered, inhibiting note taking and the SIG requests this is rectified to enable all the information to be transparent and to permit a fully informed response.

There have also been many questions raised by the SIG (and the wider sector) about this being a genuine consultation process, if there is a good faith approach of truly wanting our views, or if this is a process to 'tick the box' of consultation and the outcomes are a forgone conclusion. This view is reinforced by in addition to the unrealistic timescales, and that the

format and tone of the consultation is worded in such a way that the answers can only imply agreement with the perspective from which the questions are asked and also, very importantly, that the “facts” given are true. The SIG members and many experts with whom we have consulted and who have published comments, claim that many of the “facts” in the NPI are simply wrong, as evidenced in a letter signed by 457 leading academics, https://docs.google.com/document/d/e/2PACX-1vQF_mpQDUxaFg5CUdc-cxTONLAJ5_811wkHjfPJWqASo3niClxmo8GHvCGfb_0ul4FV6LkbtgqXAp7h/pub

with which the SIG fully concurs and which states:

“Asylum is a topic that has been extensively researched across the social sciences and humanities. Yet in the 31 references cited in the New Plan for Immigration policy statement (mostly Home Office documents), there is just one reference to research evidence, a research paper on refugee integration. As researchers with decades of knowledge and experience in the field of migration and asylum research, we wish to express our objection to these plans which not only circumvent international human rights law, but are also based on claims which are completely unfounded in any body of research evidence”

The assertion that the UK has settled more adults and children than any other country in Europe is a limited viewing of the statistics and suggests that Britain actually is world leading, or at least European leading, when it comes to its treatment of refugees. The evidence presented below not only disputes this, but suggests the opposite; that a country with the size of the economy of the UK, in actual fact compares less favourably than many European counterparts.

According to the United Nations High Commission for Refugees, in 2018 Germany was the 5th highest country in the world for asylum, hosting 1.1 million people and the only country in Europe in the top 10 of refugee hosting countries (UNHCR, 2019). Two other European countries, Sweden and Malta, were in the top 10 countries for the number of refugees per 1000 people, those being 25 and 20 respectively (UNHCR, 2019). The equivalent number for the UK was 0.5 people per 1000, or 5 per 10,000 (Sturge, 2021).

Across the 28 EU countries, there was an average of 14 asylum applications for every 10,000 and according to the UK Parliament’s own statistics, the UK ranks 17th on this list (Sturge, 2021) but yet is either the 5th biggest economy in the world (World Population Review, 2021) or the 6th biggest economy, with Germany the only European country ranked higher (Price Waterhouse Cooper, 2021). The fourth largest recipient of new asylum claims was France with 114,500 registered asylum claims, a 23% increase on 2017 (UNHCR, 2019). These were still significantly higher than the number of asylum claims in the UK which peaked in 2002 at 84,132 to the lowest point of 17,916 in 2010. The last two years, applications were 35,737 in 2019, and 29,456 in 2020 (Sturge, 2021). Specifically, regarding unaccompanied children, in 2015 Sweden received more than 35,000 unaccompanied children, which was more than the UK received in the whole 10-year period between 2006-15, which totalled 23000 (Chase, 2020). The assertion that the UK receives more unaccompanied young people than any other country is untrue, particularly if a longitudinal view such as this is taken.

Rights in International Law to Claim Asylum

In International Law, the 1951 Refugee Convention recognises that people fleeing persecution may have to use irregular means to escape in order to claim asylum in another country because, apart from the few resettlement schemes, there has been no legal way to travel to the UK for the purpose of claiming asylum. There is no such thing as an ‘illegal’ or ‘bogus’ asylum seeker. Under the 1951 Convention anyone has the right to make a claim for asylum. No country has ever withdrawn from the convention (Refugee Council, 2019).

The consultation document states that this country has a proud history of legal immigration. However many people who have entered in what could potentially be considered illegal ways because there have been no safe routes to claim asylum, also make a positive contribution to society. In the absence of enough safe, legal routes, this would deny many people who are fleeing persecution the opportunity of ever being able to fully experience rights of permanence and, ultimately, citizenship, thus limiting their human dignity and worth, in turn creating a series of other problems, amongst which include poverty, exclusion, and physical and mental health issues.

Criminal gangs who facilitate the movement of people are able to exist because of the lack of safe routes. Unless there is international agreement about quotas of refugees needing resettlement, and agreement to reduce inequalities and tackle the issues that lead to forced migration in the first instance, then the creation of a few safe legal routes is not going to tackle this issue. Even though the focus here is the UK, this is a worldwide issue and so comparison can be drawn with migration routes to other countries around the world. The individual people who make a claim for asylum (a small percentage of the people who come to the UK each year), should not bear the consequences of this and in particular, should not be criminalised but should be treated with compassion and dignity.

Decisions underpinning asylum journeys

At the end of 2019, there were estimated to be 79.5 million people forcibly displaced around the world of which 29.6 million were refugees, the remainder being internally displaced. Over 6.7million people fled Syria and of these, the UK Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme, resettled 20,000. Turkey resettled 3.6million people (Refugee Council, 2019). This is in line with the research into the forced displacement of people which asserts that most people forcibly displaced do not intend to permanently leave their countries of origin, and many decisions are taken over a protracted period of time, dependent upon their abilities to make a new lives for themselves in their host countries. Access to education, housing, healthcare, employment and experiences of racism all influence these decisions which result in people either staying in that country, or continuing onwards to a place whereby they might be able to make a life for themselves. Few people have a destination country in mind, unless there are already family connections and they are seeking to reunite with family members and may have some networks who can assist them with this transition (Düvell et al., 2017). Most people, including unaccompanied children, do not know where they are going, nor have particular knowledge of the host country prior or during departure, but instead are reliant on the networks and knowledge of those who facilitate their movement (Crawley, H. and Hagen-Zanker, 2018; Crawley, Heaven, 2010).

Based on the above and the approach of NPI consultation, the SIG members asked a fundamental question as to whether the UK Government is approaching this consultation in good faith and is genuinely seeking to draw on people's insight and experience.

While all aspects of the NPI will have an impact on our work, the SIG response has decided to focus on those aspects of the consultation that have a direct impact on social work practice.

Age Assessment of Unaccompanied Minors

The SIG's first detailed response is to the question of the age of the asylum seeker. This is because this is perhaps the issue which impacts the most directly on social work practice for us, wider BASW membership and the profession in general. There are implications for all branches of the profession due to the anticipated exponential increase in the number who

will be subjected to No Recourse to Public Funds (see below) the NPI is likely to create, however those in Children and Families services will be particularly affected.

This is also an area of social work practice where those outside the profession seek to set the rules, where there is little statutory guidance and where the guidance that is issued is rarely adequately followed due to many interconnected drivers. These are many and complex, for example the dominant setting of policy and practice in this area of social work practice by the Home Office rather than the Department for Education, pressures from senior managers in Local Authority services due to budget pressures, and many more including but not exclusively, a culture of disbelief, hostility towards the children and young people (CYP) in addition to the policy and resources issues.

The age assessment proposals of the NPI are based on the situation being dominated by adults in the children's system and services who pose a threat, the reality is the converse. It is predominantly children who are wrongly sent and dispersed as adults, sometimes to unsafe accommodation and detention, are at far greater risk, and SIG members have been involved in many cases of reassessing these CYP on the occasions when they come to the attention of our services. There is a concern that many of these CYP do not have the opportunity, knowledge or resources to be able to access the care or legal services to address this and so children remain at risk in adult services.

The issue is not sufficiently clarified and when addressed it is often about whether the person is an adult or child, i.e. under or over 18 years old. The way this issue is put in the NPI and in the wider consultation process in itself is frequently wrong. To meet the requirements of all bodies and agencies providing a service a data base of information has to be collected, hence the question usually being asked is "what is the person's date of birth (DOB)?" The SIG entirely supports the notion of the question being addressed and that social workers must be involved but it must be a multi professional process encompassing a broad range of professional participation, the minimum practice standards being those in the ADCS Guidance (Association of Directors of Children's Services, 2015).

The SIG entirely rejects the undertaking of this work by social workers alone on a single agency basis. The SIG is strongly against the recent direction of this work, namely moving towards short "brief form" hurried assessments, single agency, undertaken either close to arrival or at a later time. The SIG believes this practice is contrary to the BASW Code of Ethics and the requirements of practitioners to only do what they are knowledgeable and equipped to do and importantly to 'do no harm'. The SIG believes it is not possible to train anyone to or learn to identify an accurate DOB.

The SIG has received strong member comments and concerns relating to concerns around 'short assessments' and lack of multi-agency assessments. There is concern that these negate the impact of assessing trauma through multiagency input and providing sufficient time and safe spaces for CYP to share their experiences.

Concerns have been raised about the failure of home office officials and social workers in assessing roles, to adequately gather enough information from CYP via a supportive 'best interest' of determination of the welfare of CYP rather than investigative approach. In the majority of cases, these CYP have faced severe abuse and persecution - traumatised throughout their developmental years, impacting on their capacity to share their stories and experiences for their asylum claims. The assessments often have tick box, generalist questions and fail to provide enough time, within a safe environment which can enable CYP to talk through their experiences. SIG members desire services which allow CYP to talk freely rather than directing them with questions that limit responses and don't allow for individualised assessments.

Further members have submitted that often, when there are indications of trauma, rarely are risk assessments carried out to safeguard young people from further harm. Where risks are identified, multiagency involvement should be initiated to support early intervention for CYP. This could provide the chance to develop a thorough support plan for the CYP, working in partnership with HO case owners, so that more considered and appropriate interviewing is carried out over time to support the CYP to tell their story. Assessments are only complete when they are holistic by nature, through involving a team of professionals and assessing the whole person's social, emotional, psychological and physical well-being.

Gaps in child and adolescent development due to the impact of traumatic experiences in these CYP lives must form part of the assessment of need, including the age assessment element. Working together as professional teams in the assessment element is paramount - in the best interest of the child. Levels of literacy and cultural/ social understandings are critical when assessing CYP, ensuring informed consent, providing the context to YP of what these assessments are, why they are needed and how to appeal the outcomes.

The assertion that 54% of those who had their claims age assessed were an adult instead of a child, suggests that the issue of identifying whether or not someone has reached the age of 18, is clear cut and the outcomes of those age assessments are entirely accurate. Firstly, approximately 25% of all unaccompanied young people have their age disputed which result in an Age Assessment (Refugee Council, 2019) so 54% of those is approximately 13% of the unaccompanied young people who come into the care of the local authority. Whilst there are certain contingencies made regarding children's asylum claims, meaning there is slightly different guidance in the processing of those claims (Ang, 2019), this is an issue that has attracted a lot of attention over the years, and the 'culture of disbelief' regarding unaccompanied young people is well documented (Crawley 2007; Dorling 2013). In fact, many young people who have been age assessed go on to successfully lodge judicial reviews against those assessments, and have their assessed age overturned. If assessed as an adult, these young people could be subject to adult detention and it has been noted that there are in fact many children in adult detention (BBC, 2019).

The impact on all parties of having an age assessment is well documented (Dorling, 2013) however for young people in particular the consequences of inaccurate age assessments can be devastating (Greater Manchester Immigration and Asylum Unit, 2020). It is therefore essential that the young people who are subject to age assessment (who by definition are unaccompanied and without a parent or guardian to support them), have both advocacy during the process and access to fair, legal representation following assessments, to challenge them if necessary.

There are Good Practice Guidelines for Social Workers on undertaking age assessments (ADCS), however the fact remains that there is no accurate way to truly determine a person's age with certainty. Scientific X-ray methods have previously been attempted to be used to inform these assessments but have been discredited because of both the unethical nature of these assessments and their inaccuracy, cases between +/- 2-5 years. Setting up an age assessment board is not something that will specifically improve the accuracy of age assessments (given that the outcome of an age assessment is only ever a best guess or estimation), but depending on the NAAB role and structure, reduce the rights of the person experiencing this process even further. The proposed changes in the appeals structures and rights against the outcomes of age assessments (which have not been given fully in writing) are believed by the SIG to further fragment and confuse an already complex and unworkable situation.

The SIG would support a residential assessment based on the standards for regulated care accommodation for CYP (children and young people) where newly arrived CYP could receive comprehensive humanitarian safe reception and recuperation services, where their

initial needs ensuring their best interests are assessed and met. Attributing a DOB where the young person does not know it or where there is a realistic and serious doubt of age should be one aspect of this work supported and contributed by all the agencies and professions working with the CYP. The NAAB should be part of this and have representatives from all relevant professions.

The SIG contributed to the RMCC briefing to the HO on age assessment. We have included here an expanded list of key points from the UNHCR list in that briefing.

1. Age assessment procedures must only be undertaken as a **measure of last resort** when there are grounds for serious doubts and where other approaches have failed to establish the individual's age.
2. Where conducted age assessments should only be undertaken taking the **best interests of the child as a primary consideration**.
3. **A holistic assessment of capacity, vulnerability and needs** that reflect the actual situation of the young person is **preferred to reliance on age assessment** procedures aimed at estimating chronological age i.e. a date of birth.
4. When an age assessment is conducted, a process must be developed that allows for a **holistic, impartial multi-agency approach**, conducted over an adequate period of time, drawing on the expertise of those who play a role in the child's life, including health professionals, psychologists, teachers, foster parents, youth workers, advocates, guardians and social workers.
5. There will always be doubts about the child's age after an assessment, as it is not possible to identify the 24 hour time, i.e. the date of birth when they were born, the asylum-seeker is to be given **the benefit of the doubt** and assumed to be a child. This should be for all work where the DOB is being 'assessed'.
6. Age assessment must be carried out in a **safe, child- and gender-sensitive manner with due respect for human dignity**. The **least invasive option** should be followed which encompasses and balances physical, developmental, psychological, environmental, social history and cultural factors.
7. Age assessments also need to take into account the **ethnic and cultural background** of the child.
8. A person claiming to be under the age of 18 should be **treated as a child** and benefit from the rights of a child unless this would be clearly unreasonable.
9. Procedures on age assessment need to be clear and transparent.
10. Age assessment must **not be carried out immediately upon arrival** of separated or unaccompanied children in border areas and/or on the territory since time is crucial in building trust and allows for proper recollection and sharing of information about the child's own story which is useful in establishing his or her age.
11. No method can determine age definitively. Hence, **there will always be a margin of error**.
12. Invasive medical age assessment methods and in particular any which involve x-ray are harmful, highly contested and are subject to a high margin of error. However as social workers we believe that doctors e.g. paediatricians and other medical professionals, who routinely undertake comprehensive medical assessments, are essential in contributing to a view on age as a component of a holistic assessment.
13. Assessments are **overseen by an independent guardian** who can be present if requested to attend all of the components of a holistic assessment by the individual concerned.
14. There must be a **procedure to appeal** against the decision as well as the necessary support to do so. This should include access to legal assistance and counselling to understand their right to a legal remedy.

15. Should the age assessment conclude that the young person is not a child, the applicant should be **provided assistance and protection based on a comprehensive assessment of their protection needs and vulnerabilities.**

A representative from the SIG attended a sector-wide meeting with the HO on Age Assessment. As noted, a significant additional information was provided by the HO much of which has not been given in written form. The SIG requests written information to fully consider. This is particularly relevant to the proposals on appeals on age assessments and the intention to limit (or prohibit) Judicial Reviews. While the SIG fully supports an ending of the current assessments and appeals systems which are drawn out, costly and damaging to all involved, we cannot support proposals to introduce a variation of rights of appeal for assessments by some and not by others and with different rights and funding depending on the circumstances, as being the correct way to address this but instead there should be a holistic comprehensive assessment process at the outset as detailed above and significantly reduce the need for appeals.

The SIG rejects the use of all scientific methods which are either intrusive or involve X-ray. The HO has not provided information about new scientific methods which may be introduced and we await clarification.

The HO has announced that it wishes to 'codify' what an age assessment should comprise and this will be delivered in secondary legislation. The SIG is deeply concerned that, based on the current direction of travel, the pressure to move away from holistic work, to undertake 'short assessments, the social work profession could be legally bound to undertake a task which cannot be done under a misguided 'codification'. We ask that the DfE, the ADCS and the wider profession be fully involved with all developments in this area of practice.

There are many other issues in the NPI in the document and which have been outlined at consultation meetings which the SIG has not been able to fully consider. The following are initial responses to some key issues.

The Inadmissibility and a two tiered approach to rights and entitlements

The SIG is concerned at the establishment of long term uncertainty and that the proposals that those who have travelled by 'unofficial routes' will be treated as criminals, will lead to more suffering and is wrong. The criteria for those who will be able to claim asylum is too narrow and impossible for most to meet. The indented rules to give temporary leave which would be reviewed every 30 months condemns the asylum seeker to permanent and damaging insecurity.

No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF)

The NPI intends to subject all those with 'temporary protection' in this two tiered system to NRPF and severely limit their financial, health and education entitlements. This will create a large group of people with seriously limited life chances, and subjected to long term poverty and destitution. This will cause untold damage to them as individuals and to society in general. For the social work and all the professions and public and voluntary services, this will cause even greater pressures as the health and welfare needs of these people exponentially increase.

Extension to the use of Asylum Estate

The important issue in housing people seeking asylum, is that accommodation is safe, secure and of good quality so that the people housed have access to the support, guidance

and services they need. Both the use of 'hotels' and the expansion of the asylum estate are problematic and have been subject of recent criticism due to the inhumane and degrading conditions in which people are housed. The Refugee Council has criticised the use of host hotels and argue that those living there are subjected to dehumanising treatment conditions which have a negative impact on mental health including at times exposure to sustained racism (Grierson, 2021).

Regarding the use of former barracks, in March 2021, Penally Barracks was closed down after the Independent Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration and Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Prisons deemed Penally and Napier Barracks in Kent "run down and unsuitable" (BBC, 2021). A number of [other failings](#) were noted including issues pertaining to leadership and management; safety; respect and preparation for leaving accommodation (Independent Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration, 2021); all of which were extremely concerning and showed a disregard to the dignity and humanity of the people being housed there.

Conclusions

Whilst a commitment to safe and legal routes to asylum are welcomed, this cannot be to the detriment of those who have no access to these and flee their homes in less safe or organised ways, and subsequently make a claim for asylum. People need to be treated in a humane and dignified way, including access to good quality housing, education, legal representation and support services and must not be criminalised for seeking safety.

The SIG is deeply concerned that many of the proposals in the NPI are the antithesis of social work as an ethical-practice and human-rights-based profession, the UNCRC and the best interests of children and young people. It risks placing many CYP at greater risk in adult accommodation, in detention and seriously limiting their life chances.

Rather than seeking to change a legal system that does not uphold human rights but fails to support the human-rights-based, ethical and regulated practise of the social work profession, the current system needs to be improved, structured and funded so that claims can be processed, and greater efforts should be made to support people humanely whilst the claims are considered and during (and arguably after) appeals hearings, whilst a person remains living within the UK.

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Academics Letter

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