

IrISH ReFUGee CoUNCIL –

**INdePeNdeNt ADVocacy PrograMMe:
EVALUation Report April 2012 – November 2013**

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Dublin, Ireland



1. PURPOSE AND METHODOLOGY

1.1 Purpose

The purpose of this review was to evaluate the progress of the project against its stated objectives, namely:

1. By the end of this project separated child victims of trafficking will have improved support to assist in overcoming past trauma and in linking in with the community, thereby rebuilding their lives and childhood, and to assist in empowering children who are at risk of trafficking.
2. By the end of the pilot, separated children involved in the project will have a significantly improved experience of the immigration and child welfare processes. They will have: an understanding of how these processes work; participated in the processes and made decisions about their future; and received services and responses appropriate to their needs and entitlements.

The evaluation also sought to consider, what:

- Works well and what needs adapting?
- Actions and outputs have come out of the project?
- Impact did the outcomes have on the beneficiaries?
- Is the impact on the broader community?

The target audience of the evaluation is the Irish Refugee Council and the project's current funding bodies and any potential future funders.

1.2 Methodology

The information to undertake the evaluation was gathered through five routes.

1. Initial desktop research was followed by,
2. A field visit in which focus groups were held with key stakeholders, namely

- Children and young people
- Advocates
- Service provider/stakeholders

The focus groups took the form of semi structured questions (see appendix one) which were put to the participants thus enabling a broader discussions rather than merely asking a set of restricted questions.

3. Separate on-line questionnaires were available for children and young people, service providers and for advocates (again see appendix one)
4. A small number of one to one interviews with key Irish Refugee Council staff
5. Review of case notes kept by the Irish Refugee Council on each 'match'

1.3 Research challenges

In truth the focus groups were not well attended with only two participants attending the young persons and the statutory services sessions. The advocate's session was attended by four people. However the relatively small number of attendees allowed time within the groups for some quite full and in-depth discussions. This was compensated by the use of the other approaches mentioned above such as the on-line questionnaire and case material review which ensured that a wealth of information was available to the evaluator.

2. BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

2.1 Separated and unaccompanied children

Every year high numbers of separated children arrive in European countries. It is widely recognised that separated children have many specific and particular vulnerabilities. Many may have witnessed or experienced extreme violence and rights violations as a result of conflict or social and political upheaval and the hardships, deprivations and dangers of their flight into exile may further add to this trauma. Some have been trafficked into or across Europe for the purposes of exploitation often in the commercial sex industry or in other forms of harmful and unregulated labour. By definition all separated children lack a responsible adult to care for, and to protect them, and to act as an advocate in the promotion of their best interests. Their vulnerabilities are often exacerbated because of language and cultural differences, racism and discrimination and the challenges of navigating a complex immigration system.

However despite these apparent vulnerabilities the responses towards many separated children in Europe are often inadequate. This may be because of a lack of available resources or because governments, agencies and professionals do not have a sufficient level of knowledge or skill to work effectively with this group of children. It may be because of values and attitudes that give precedence to the importance of border control and migration management over the rights and best interests of children. Or it may be because societies feel that they should 'look after their own children' before diverting resources towards child migrants. For many separated children arrival in Europe is not the end of their troubles; it is the beginning of them.

2.2 The independent advocacy project

The Independent Advocacy Project centres on supporting separated children in finding their own voice by matching children with advocates who act as mentors. The objective of the project is to promote the young person's integration into Irish society and their understanding of the asylum process.

The pilot project includes advocates in Dublin, Waterford, Limerick and Cork who each act on behalf of at least one young person.

The advocacy pilot aims to assign advocates to children vulnerable to trafficking or those that have been trafficked to prevent exploitation or further exploitation. The independent advocate assigned to each separated child is tasked with advocating on their behalf in their dealings with all aspects of their lives including with the HSE and the Department of Justice. They will be responsible for linking the child in with local organisations and services and supporting the child on a personal level throughout the asylum application procedure or during a trafficking investigation. The advocate's principle responsibility will be to make a best interest assessment and develop a plan with a durable solution in mind. The aim of the advocacy pilot programme is to ensure greater continuity for the separated child as they navigate the immigration system, to guarantee their rights and security, and to empower separated children to be their own protectors as well.

The advocates are volunteers who were locally recruited or appointed through the regional organisations. They were then trained by the Irish Refugee Council over two days (the IRC's Independent Law Centre participated in this process). They are vetted through their regional organisations. The role of the advocate is to build a relationship based on trust. Therefore advocates were recruited based on their exhibited level of commitment and their proven work with people and/or children in an advocacy capacity in the past. The main 'programme of work' shared between the advocate and the young person is a 'goals plan'. The aim of the plan is to set goals for 6 months and one year, big and small objectives, and to work through them with a supportive person. Additionally, the advocate will undertake to support the young person in ensuring their basic needs are met. Through this process, the advocate may communicate with the social workers and/or care-providers, teachers, solicitors, etc.

The number of visits between the young person and the advocate is determined by the young person's needs/interests. Some meet once per week and others meet once every two or three weeks. The advocates note any activities, discussions and assistance needed. Advocates have an initial meeting with their young person to introduce the advocacy pilot. The following two visits focus on getting to know each other and finding out what the young person likes to do.

2.3 Advocates

At the point of this evaluation the Independent Advocacy Project has worked with 19 advocates.

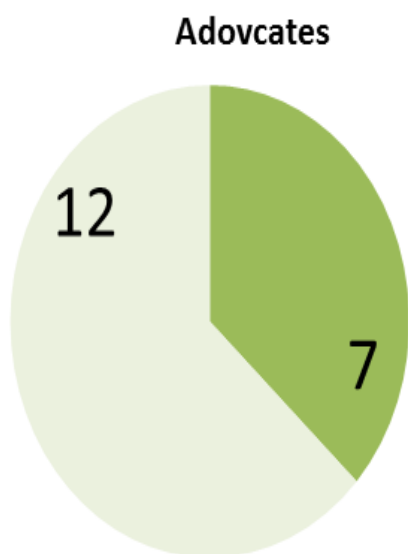
2.3.1 How were they recruited?

The Irish Refugee Council benefit from great interest in the advocacy positions from a variety of professional backgrounds, for example, special needs assistants, barristers and solicitors, students, professional youth workers, and people from across the migrant sector.

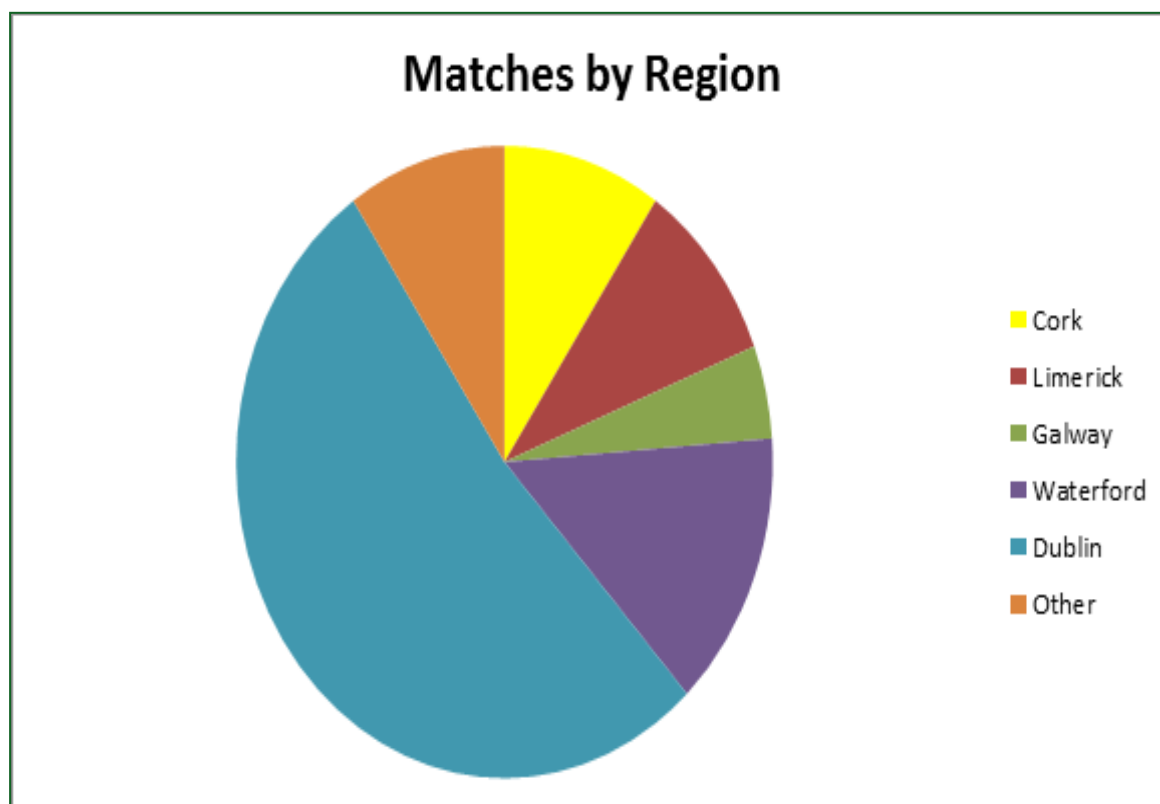
Advocates were recruited through an open call on the website. Interested volunteers already working with the Irish Refugee Council were approached individually. Advocates in Limerick and Waterford were recruited locally through Doras Luimni and the Integration & Support Unit of the Edmund Rice Centre respectively.

2.3.3 How they were trained?

All advocates have been trained over the course of three days on; child protection, indicators of trafficking, working with young survivors of trauma, and the asylum and immigration processes. Training on the asylum process was provided by the Irish Refugee Council's Independent Law Centre and through two seminars on *Closing a Protection Gap* where solicitors and social workers spoke about supporting separated children in the asylum process, relationship building and case management. Training for those who would supervise advocates also lasted three days. Top-up training is made available at regular intervals through seminars and events hosted by the Irish Refugee Council. Additionally, all advocates have access to funding for relevant training. Advocates frequently attend training provided by the Dublin Rape Crisis centre on working with asylum seekers and refugees affected by trauma, including children.¹



■ 2012
■ 2013

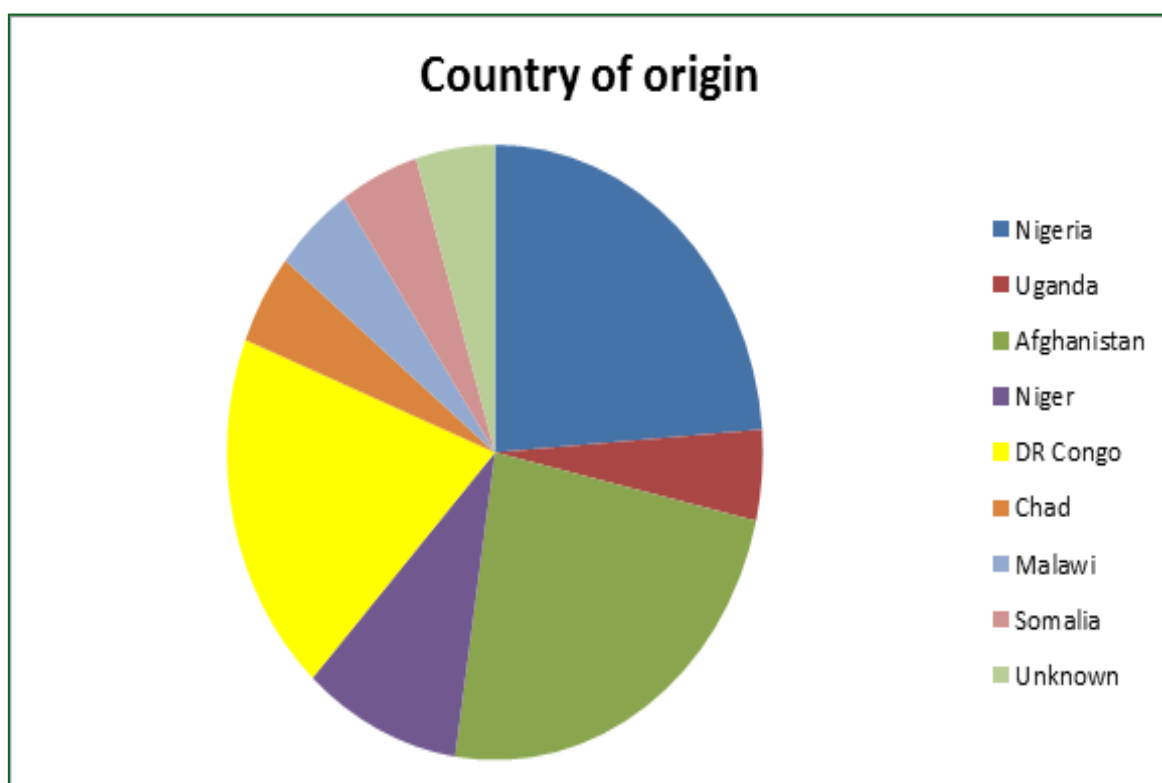
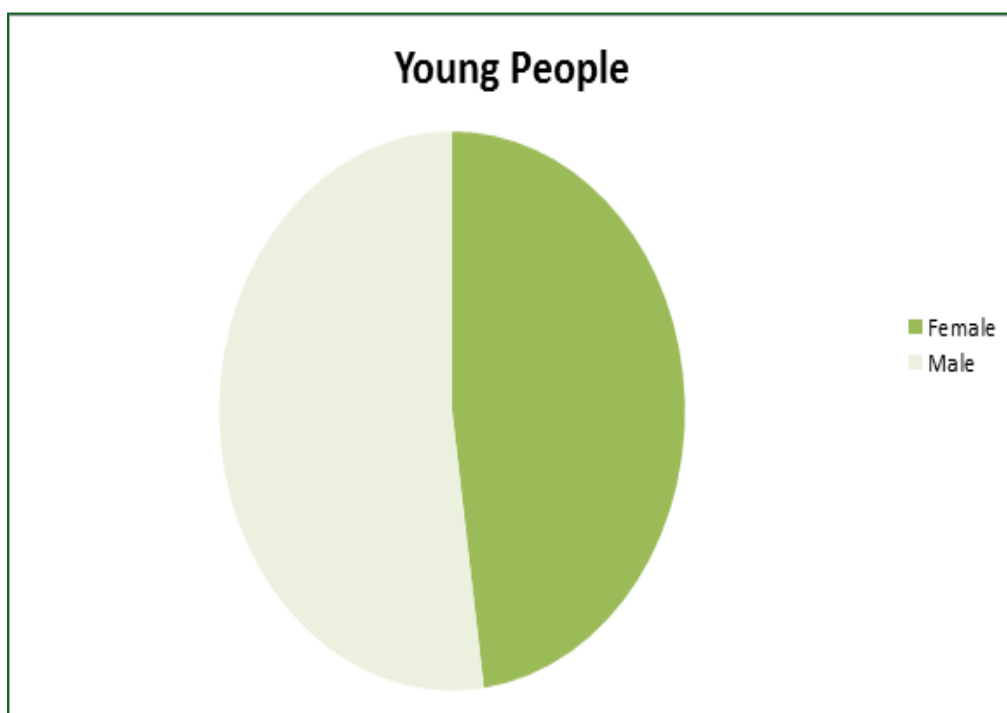


¹ These training sessions are funded by the European Migration Fund.

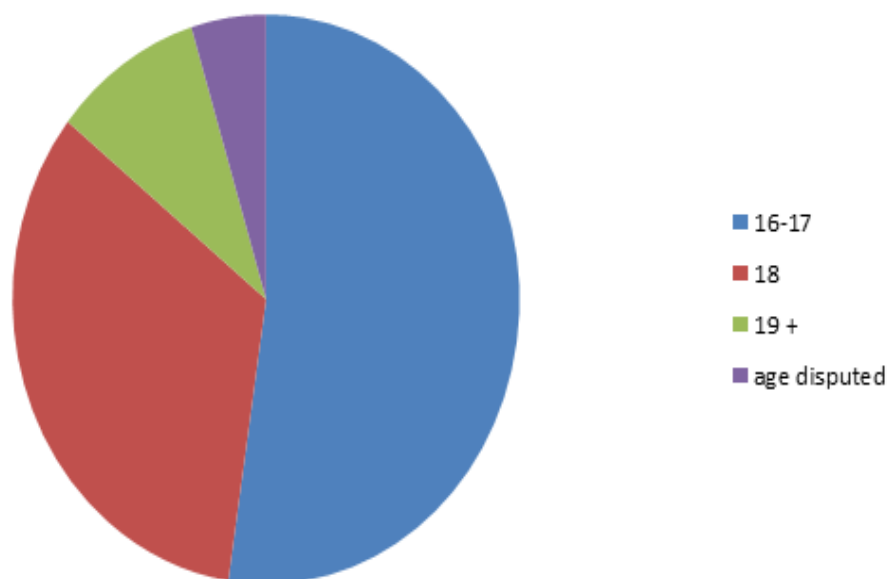
2.4 The young people the project has supported

At the point of this evaluation the Independent Advocacy Project has worked with 21 young people. All 21 young people were in various stages of the asylum process. There were 6 known changes of status during matches of which 4 young people were recognised as refugees and 2 were granted humanitarian leave to remain. For 8 young people there was no change of status and a further 7 matches that came to an end while the young person was still seeking asylum.

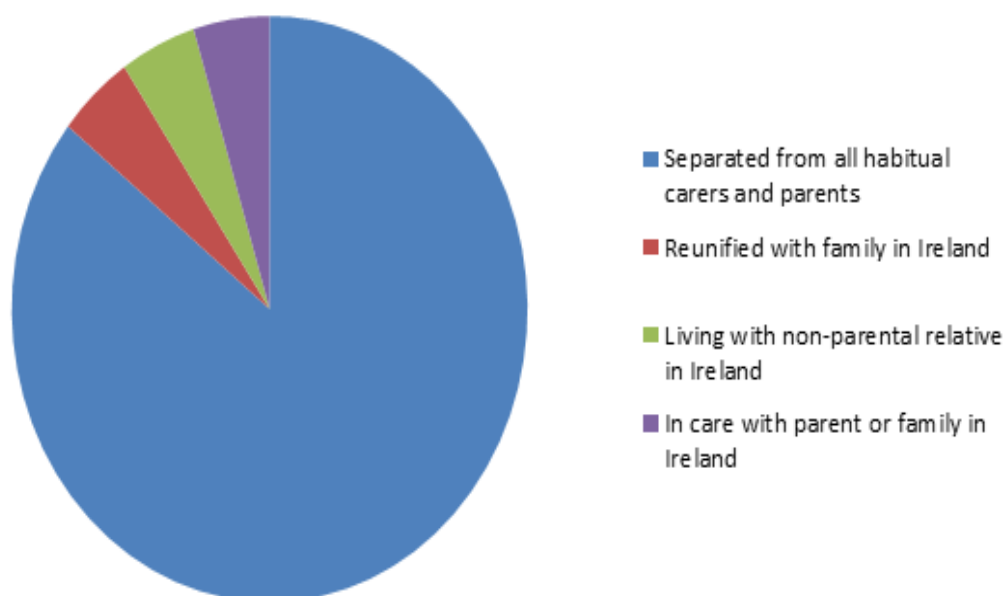
2.4.1 The young people – who are they?



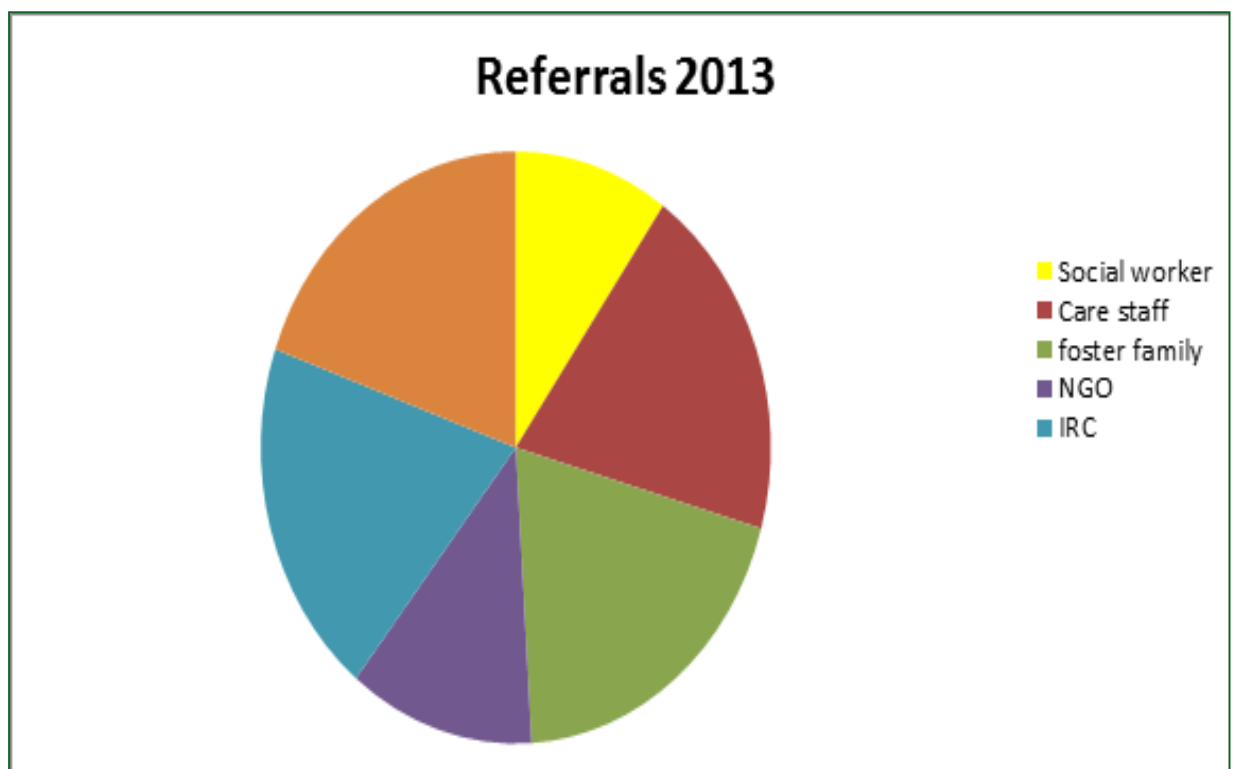
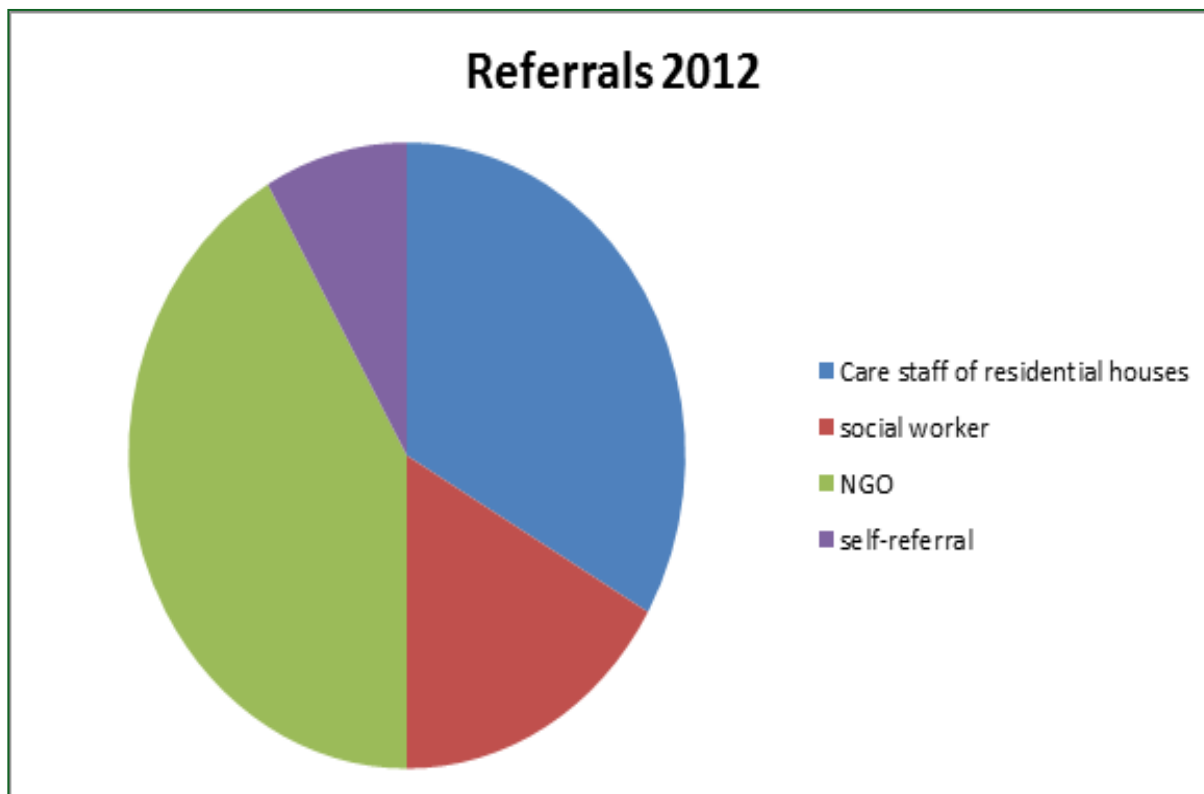
Age of young people upon referral



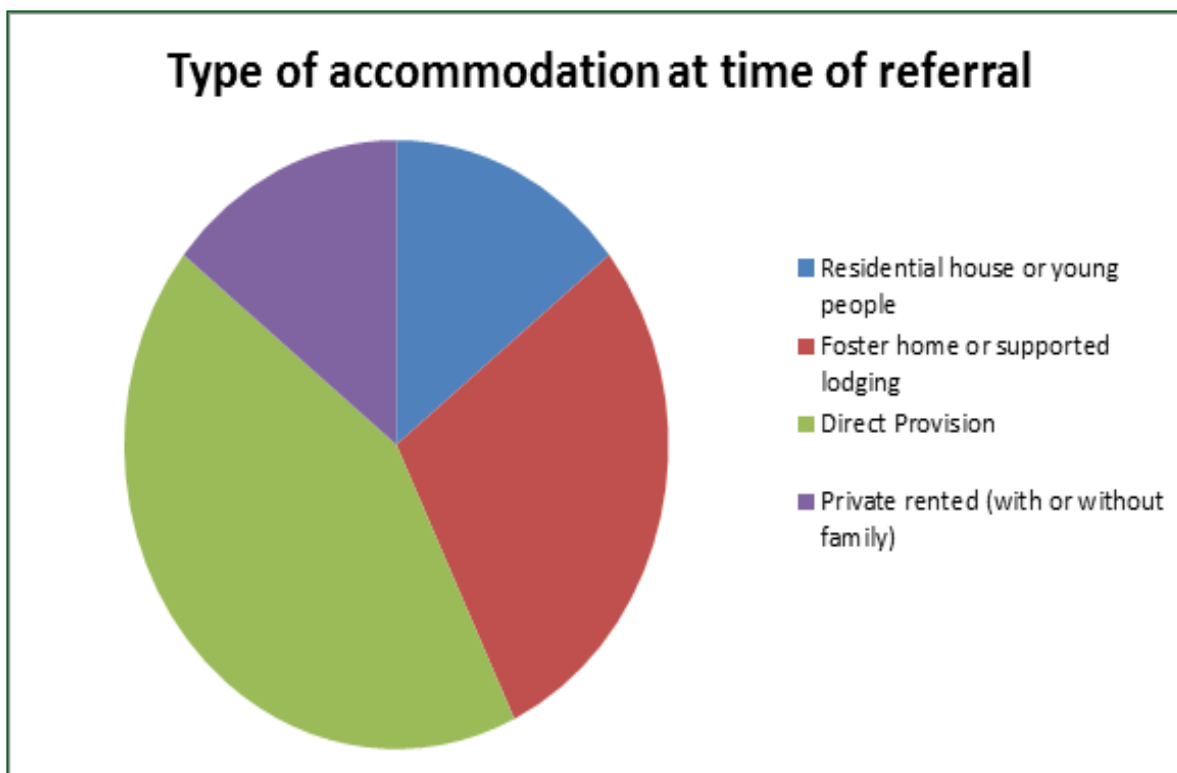
Family status



2.4.2 Referral sources



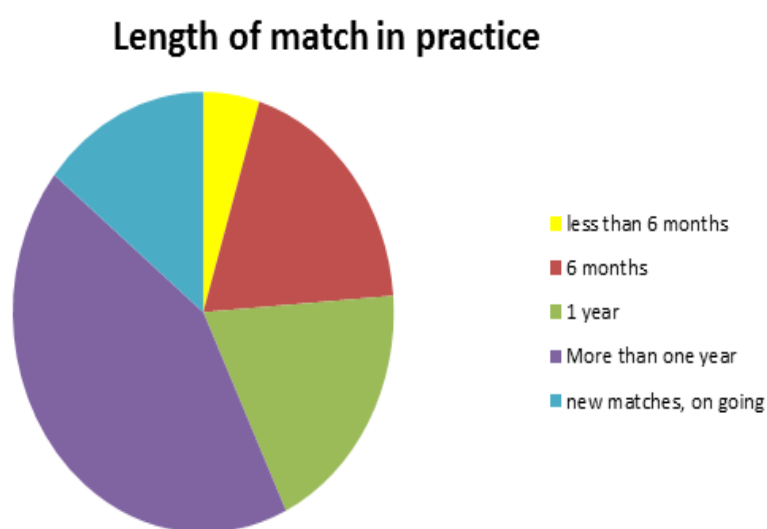
2.4.3 The young people's accommodation at the time of referral



Young people moved from residential houses² to foster homes and supported lodgings³ during the project. Additionally, some of those who reached the age of 18 during the project moved to Direct Provision accommodation.

2.4.4 Duration of the relationship

Advocates and young people sign a commitment contract with each other. The contract states that they agree to meet for a period of 6 months. After 6 months the advocate and the young person may review their relationship and decide if they, together, would like to continue beyond 6 months. The match can last for 1 year, fully funded. Beyond one year, the advocate and the young person can continue to work together with a reduced stipend. For the first year the budget is €30 euro per visit. This is to enable the pair to do fund things together. During this period, the advocate must submit a report to the IRC about activities undertaken, any concerns and support needed and the general feeling about the meeting. Beyond year one, the budget is halved. There are no supervisory reporting requirements beyond the one year mark. Support from the IRC is offered upon request at this point. In some cases, the IRC has continued to support matches at full capacity due to the deemed vulnerability of the young person.



² Small 6 bed houses registered for inspection with the Child and Family Agency. Full-time care staff in the house 24 hours a day. Each young person would have at least one key worker (assigned care staff) working with them.

³ Supported lodgings are semi-support care in a family setting.

Less than 6 months

One match lasted less than 6 months. The young person and the advocate met up once, but the young person did not feel they needed the programme's support at that point. The young person was living in a small town with a foster family.

6 months

Four matches lasted for about 6 months for varying reasons. In one case the advocate and the young person decided to close the match because the young person received a Stamp 4 and felt she did not need the service anymore. The advocate wished to end this match because the young person was frequently cancelling, showing up late and had a general indifference about meetings.

The same advocate began a second match which also lasted 6 months. This match came to end because the advocate's circumstances changed. They are still in touch and they have met up even after their formal match ended.

Two other matches (one advocate working with two young people) were closed by the Irish Refugee Council. The Irish Refugee Council had not received any reports from the advocate and thus instructed the advocate to close the match and inform the young people they could come to the Council if they required any assistance or wished to have a new advocate.

One year

The four matches that closed after one year were based outside of Dublin. The three in Waterford came to a natural end. The young people have the option of continuing to engage with the Integration & Support Unit. One in Cork came to a natural end, but the young person continued to have contact with the advocate after one year.

More than one year

Many of the advocates and young people wish to continue to work together for many reasons, namely because they have a good relationship, they do fun things and the young people feel they get support from their advocate. Nine of the young people have been working with their advocates for more than one year. As stated above, they do not have reporting requirements unless the match is exceptional i.e. the child is deemed vulnerable by the Irish Refugee Council and the advocate.

2.5 Guardianship – international standards

In part the advocacy project grew out of the debate and discussion in Ireland surrounding the appointment of guardians for separated and unaccompanied children. It emerged within the Irish Refugee Council in recognition of their concerns that there was a significant gap in the provision which a guardian would deliver within Ireland. Whilst the advocacy project is not intended to be a substitute guardianship scheme or indeed a lighter version of guardianship it does have a number of parallels with such schemes regarding outputs. The work of the advocacy project is guided by the Core Standards for Guardians that were developed as part of the Closing a Protection Gap project (see appendix three). The standards form the backdrop to the training that all advocates receive as part of their training.

The question of guardianship for unaccompanied and separated children features within many Conventions, international guidelines and other international instruments. Finding a concise definition of the terms guardian or guardianship however is particularly elusive. This view is endorsed by the Inter-agency Guidelines on Unaccompanied and Separated Children which note that 'The precise definition, function and manner of appointment of a guardian varies from jurisdiction to jurisdiction. However, in essence the term guardianship refers to the designation of responsibility to an adult or organization for ensuring that a child's best interests are fully represented'. Whilst the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) does not have a specific Article that could be described

as specific to guardianship there are references to guardians throughout it and the spirit of the CRC recognises the importance of guardians where children are deprived of the care of their parents or other carers. The CRC obliges states to act where children are deprived of their family environment by fulfilling the child's entitlement to special protection and assistance (Article 20). Similarly states must provide a child who is seeking refugee status or is otherwise considered to be a refugee with appropriate protection and humanitarian assistance (Article 22). It is difficult to see how these obligations around protection and assistance can adequately be met without the appointment of a guardian who acts in the best interests of the child.

It is not proposed here to explore or analyse in particular detail the nuances of the many texts that refer to guardians. In addition to the CRC perhaps the most relevant, though this is certainly not an exclusive list of instruments are,

- The Committee on the Rights of the Child, General Comment No 6
- UNHCR's Guidelines on Policies and Procedures in dealing with unaccompanied children seeking asylum
- UNHCR's Guidelines on Internal Protection: Child Asylum Claims
- The Separated Children in Europe Programme's Statement of Good Practice (see appendix two)
- Closing a Protection Gap - Core Standards for Guardians of Separated Children (see appendix three)
- The Council of Europe Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings
- Inter-Agency Guiding Principles on Unaccompanied and Separated Children, International Committee of the Red Cross

Whilst each instrument is set out differently and whilst they may prioritise differently or look at certain areas in more depth there is a general convergence that guardians should be,

- Experienced and skilled in working with children
- Knowledgeable about the issues that impact upon children in migration
- Trained, supervised and supported
- Independent from decision making agencies and be free from any conflicts of interest
- Subject to employment and law enforcement checks regarding their suitability to work with children.

Similarly there is considerable cross-over and reinforcement regarding the role of the guardian which should be to ensure that,

- Decisions are taken in the best interests of the child
- The child has appropriate care, health care, welfare provision, accommodation and education
- The child is appropriately consulted and their voice heard in decision making processes
- Legal advice and representation is provided to the child
- Where appropriate the child is supported to trace their family and where possible re-establish contact with them
- Links are established and maintained between the child and the agencies that provide, or may provide, services to them

In addition the guardian should,

- Contribute to the identification of a durable solution for the child
- Support the child through all decision making procedures regarding their immigration status and their care planning.

3. FINDINGS

3.1 Young people

3.1.1 Overview

The young people valued the service they had received and spoke very highly of their individual advocates. They had felt supported in dealing with the complexities of navigating through the complications and challenges that asylum determination presents and also felt that their advocates had helped them to access services that they would otherwise have struggled to receive. They also commented on the friendliness of their advocates and felt that their advocates cared about them and were genuinely motivated to offer help and to assist in their integration into Irish society. Of particular significance was the fact that they trusted their advocate and felt safe, both physically and emotionally, with their 'match'. Young people felt that they were listened to by their advocates and that their advocates did not 'take over' but offered advice and guidance rather than 'instructions'. The young people were guided to make their own choices rather than being told what to do. The term 'advocate' was not fully understood by young people.

3.1.2 What works well, what needs adapting?

Young people felt that they benefited from having a named person who they could contact directly and who was, in the main, generally available. They contrasted this with other services where, in their experiences they rarely talked to the same person more than once and where there was frequently delays in getting to talk to the correct or most appropriate person.. They also welcomed having someone to talk to who was not compelled to share what was said with other governmental departments. This allowed the young people to test options, weigh up consequences, and then make balanced and informed decisions.

Another area that young people felt worked well was the social interaction between themselves and their advocates. They felt that it was good to do fun things with their advocate and to partake in leisure activities together. This helped build relationships, as they saw a 'human' side of their advocates, and trust.

The young people who engaged with the research felt very strongly that their advocates had helped them access both statutory and voluntary sector support and services. One young woman commented,

I have a baby. My advocate told me about some of the things I would need for her and then helped me to get them from charity and second hand shops.'

There was a genuine sense from young people that without the involvement of their advocate they would have found it extremely challenging to have accessed the support and services to which they are entitled. Young people also reported that their advocate had been pivotal in their orientation into Irish life in general and into life in the cities where they lived in particular.

The young people were so resoundingly positive about the project that it was difficult to identify what they felt could be done differently. They didn't seem to fully grasp the role of their advocate – though if the relationship worked for them this is perhaps of minimal significance. Waiting times for allocation of an advocate varied but again it probably isn't too important for young people to understand the allocation process. Despite references to the help that young people had received from their advocate they did seem to put more weight on some of the social activities or the routine help they had benefited from in their day to day lives. Perhaps they see advocates in more of a befriending role than was initially perceived in the project's design.

3.1.3 What actions and outputs have emerged from the project?

Young people certainly felt more integrated into Irish society and thus safer as a result of their engagement with their advocates. They also reported that once they had an allocated advocate their appointments with their lawyers and/or the immigration service seemed to be arranged much quicker and ran much smoother. They had a better 'immigration experience' though they didn't necessarily understand the procedures any better and it wasn't possible to assess whether the involvement of the advocate had materially impacted on the immigration decision. Generally young people felt that they had had opportunities to relax, have some fun, forget about their day to day worries and find a way to look to the future with an increased sense of optimism.

3.1.4 What is the impact on children and young people?

They are less confused about what is happening to them and the advocate is another player in the safeguarding of the young person. Young people feel that they have someone on their side and are thus perhaps more emotionally robust to deal with the changes they are experiencing and in particular the process they must undertake regarding both their care and welfare and the immigration process. The project has made them more aware, both regarding their rights but also around realistic expectations as they take their life forward. They have had fun through relaxation and leisure and have been able, for short periods at least, to experience the same things as their peers of similar ages. A list is provided at 3.2.3 below that detail some of the practical impacts that young people have experienced.

3.1.5 What is the impact on the broader community?

The advocates have invested effort with young people explaining about the Irish lifestyle, attitudes, values and other attributes thus enabling a healthier understanding of the communities in which they live. It is hard to evaluate what the impact of this is upon the local community and the relationship between the young person and others in these communities. However none of the young people outlined any direct experiences within their communities where they had felt threatened, marginalised or racially abused and this can only be interpreted as a good thing for the young person in particular and the wider community in general.

3.2 Advocates

3.2.1 Overview

Advocates outlined that they enjoy their role; they find it rewarding, generally fun and believe that it is a necessary and worthwhile project. They believe that they have had a positive impact on the lives of the young people with whom they have been matched, though they felt that their positive contributions on a practical basis outweighed their contribution towards the healthy emotional wellbeing of their match. Relationships with young people were good and advocates suggested that their relationship was more personable than that of the other professionals involved in the child's life. The relationship was also described as 'informal'. No significant issues were noted other than it sometimes took time to get to know each other and to feel relaxed in each other's company. Whilst advocates felt that they gave a lot of advice within their role much of the contact time was spent undertaking recreational activities, going to cafes and restaurants for example or going for walks in the park. There was a sense that their role was more about having fun and acting as a befriender rather than being engaged in front line advocacy and/or championing the rights of their matched young person.

Advocates outlined that they sought to involve the young person as much as possible in decision making and that they consulted with them before taking action. Activities would be agreed together, though sometimes young people were short on ideas about what to do, and advocates worked hard on not dictating what they would do during the visits. As already noted advocates delivered a lot of advice to young people but this was generally framed within a range of options and potential consequences and whilst advocates supported young people in the process of thinking through choices they did not make decisions on behalf of their matched young person leaving that up to them. An advocate believed that,

'Young people have a sense of ownership, control and autonomy regarding the project and lead on plans, actions, ending and engagement. The project is definitely young person led'

There was a feeling of belonging to the Irish Refugee Council and the project coordinator was described as very approachable and supportive and that she was credible i.e. she was knowledgeable and 'knew what she was talking about'. Advocates felt that they received enough support to undertake their role. To some degree they felt valued and appreciated by the Refugee Council, but felt that there were sometimes relatively long periods when they had little contact from the organisation and that, in practice, they worked alone.

3.2.2 What works well, what needs adapting?

Whilst young people may not appreciate the subtleties of the role they have grasped that advocates are independent and are not linked to either the immigration process or the care system. This fosters trust and confidence in advocates and allows young people to openly consider and explore options before making decisions. Advocates are able to invite young people to consider any risks, both actual and potential, of proposed plans and actions and it is reasonable to assume that this contributes to keeping them safer. Relationships work well and advocates enjoy their role and young people have fun.

The schedule regarding visits, which are usually fortnightly, works well. It enables continuity, allows the relationship to develop and fosters appropriate levels of familiarity but is not too time consuming and is not too intense. Advocates felt that on balance giving young people their phone numbers had worked well. Young people could get advice from their advocates and arrange visits etc. quickly, and to date this provision had not been abused in that advocates had not been contacted inappropriately, excessively or at unsociable times. Matching processes would appear to have worked well as none of the advocates were dissatisfied with the young people they had been matched with and all felt that they were appropriate. However the view was offered that there may have been other young people to whom an advocate would have been a better match but it is not possible to analyse this. It is inevitable that matches will always be constrained and limited by availability and the pool of who is available (advocate) and ready (young person) to be matched at any particular time.

Advocates were clear that they had been unable to make any significant contribution to the determination of a durable solution for the young people with whom they were matched. This is indicative of a limitation of the role of the advocate and whilst other stakeholders see the benefits of a supporting and befriending role the statutory providers seem unprepared to relinquish any aspect of their decision making powers to a voluntary body. Decisions relating to immigration status and care arrangements were not perceived as being a part of the advocates remit and indeed advocates saw themselves as friends, advisers and supporters of young people rather than decision makers or influencers of decisions.

Quite often young people seem to find it hard to come up with ideas about what to do and despite a willingness by advocates not to take over the relationship, see above, in practice it is often their suggestions that lead to the activities that the advocate and young person do together. This makes the role hard on two levels, namely an unease about 'taking over' and a purely practical issue of having to constantly come up with (new) things to do. The funding support provided of €30 per visit was also seen as a limiter regarding the choice of activities and hence the overall experience of visits and it may be helpful if advocates were paid expenses in advance, perhaps through a float system which could be topped up. Another practical challenge was the young people's appreciation of timing and reliability. In practice this means that young people are often late for appointments meaning that advocates are left waiting for the young person to appear and indeed on some occasions planned activities have had to be rescheduled. For example an advocate had booked an appointment for herself and her young 'match' to attend a spa beauty session. The young woman turned up so late that they had missed their allocated slot and had to reschedule the appointment.

It was expected that as part of their role advocates would form links and build bridges with the other parties, including the child's own community, who are involved in the life of the young person. This has not worked well and generally engagement is poor or non-existent. As one advocate noted,

'To date I have had no interaction with others working with child'

And a fellow advocate commented:

'I do not have any relationships with other adults who are involved in his life'

Whilst advocates reported that overall they felt supported in doing their work there was also comments that they felt somewhat isolated. Suggestions were made that there should be regular team meeting or a method established for advocates to engage with each other – perhaps via an on-line forum hosted and supported by the Refugee Council.

Similarly it was felt that improvements could be made to the communication between the young person and the Refugee Council in no small part so that young people could gain a better understanding of what the project is seeking to achieve.

Advocates felt that they were often given fairly minimal information about the background of the young person with whom they were matched and in particular the factors and reasons behind why they had migrated and their experiences en route to Ireland. Whilst this was not felt to be a significant gap some advocates felt it would be helpful to have a better picture of the experiences of the young people they are matched with. This may inform decisions about what, and what not, to do with young people, what situations to avoid and would give an understanding, and possibly influence responses, to any related challenging behaviour. It also raised the question of whether risk assessments should be undertaken as part of the matching process.

The Irish Refugee Council is keen to link the work of the advocacy project to their lobbying work. They want the project to be able to provide direct, personal examples to illustrate and bolster their lobbying positions and to identify and quantify issues that are detrimental to young people in migration so that the Refugee Council can lobby for change. To date there is very little evidence of this happening. Advocates are focused on individual work with young people and are not feeding any practice issues systematically to the Refugee Council. Advocates do feel that there are some very real issues that need to be collated so that a more strategic way of dealing with them can be developed rather than individual responses that may bring about change for a specific young person but do not change overall patterns of practice.

3.2.3 What actions and outputs have emerged from the project?

Young people have benefitted in a number of ways (see below) not least because they have been given opportunities to make decisions and have, to varying degrees, felt empowered. They have also had time to have fun and to learn about attitudes, customs and way of life in Ireland. The focus group with advocates and a review of the young people's case notes identified a number of concrete and practical actions arising from the project. These are,

- Securing funding to enrol on a course at college (x 2)
- Providing advice on specific areas of the asylum determination procedure (X 2)
- Helping a young person secure a temporary job over the Christmas period
- Identifying scholarships (X 2)
- Help with securing a medical card
- Working with the young person to organise a work experience placement
- Assistance in getting baby clothes and other necessary equipment
- Help with obtaining a student card
- Contacting lawyers when the young person had requested an update regarding their application (X 2)
- Help with obtaining a driving licence
- Arranging for a young person to meet with their lawyer
- Support with school entry (X 2)
- Generally support a young woman through her pregnancy

3.2.4 What is the impact on children and young people?

As noted above there are some very tangible practical outcomes that have been delivered by advocates that have improved the level of support available to young people. The provision of advice and an outlet for young people to talk about their difficulties and their plans must improve their safeguarding outcomes and whilst no child protection issues have specifically been raised by advocates their engagement in the young person's life must also improve their safety not least because they are well placed to note and question changes in mood, outlook and behaviour and to identify any other indicators of child abuse. Young people have also developed a trusting relationship with their advocates and have someone to talk to and whilst advocates were unsure about the emotional benefits to young people it is likely that this may help their process of rebuilding their lives and adapting to a new and perhaps alien culture. They have learned new skills in dealing with issues, have been empowered to make their own decisions and appear in some instances to have a greater sense of self-worth. They have also had some fun and relaxing times and have been able to unwind with their advocate.

Advocates are able to stay involved with their matched young person beyond their 18th birthday and, perhaps more significantly, through the difficult period as they leave the state childcare system and engage on the transition to adulthood. At this time statutory support is reduced and what remains is invariably transferred to other providers and departments. Additionally the young people lose some of the discretionary provisions they have benefited from within the immigration determination procedure and for many the threat and hence their anxieties around return to their countries of origin are heightened. It is a challenging time for them and the presence and continuity of their advocate and the advice and practical support offered by their advocates appears to contribute to their resilience.

3.2.5 What is the impact on the broader community?

Advocates feel that they are able to inform young people about some of their behaviours that Irish citizens may not fully understand and in turn enlighten the young people with an insight into aspects of Irish culture that may seem strange to them. Although difficult to evaluate this is likely to play at least a small part in improving community cohesion.

3.3 Service provider stakeholders ⁵

3.3.1 Overview

Service providers tended to see the role of the advocate as a befriender, mentor or a 'friend with boundaries'. There was a perception that young people didn't 'know what an advocate is' which was indeed echoed by young people (see 3.1.1 above). There was recognition that the systems that unaccompanied and separated children need to navigate are complicated and that young people benefitted from having someone to support and guide them through these. Their role was also described as providing guidance and advice, offering support and filling in the gaps left by other professionals. Advocates were seen as contributing to the young person's social development and as someone who could provide fun recreational activities. There was no appetite for advocates having a statutory or more formal standing and indeed views were expressed that they should not engage with the young person's asylum application.

Advocates were seen as complimentary to the role of other professionals and in the main were seen as cooperative and non-obstructive. Their engagement was generally welcomed though concerns were aired about too many people working with, and intruding into, the lives of young people.

⁵ These stakeholders were social workers and those providing after care support who worked for the child and family agency in addition to others who provide services to unaccompanied and separated children.

Whilst it was acknowledged that it is inappropriate to generalise because all the young people are different. Service providers felt that whilst the advocacy project delivered a useful service it wasn't an essential addition to provision.

The service providers also commented that the advocacy project should focus on the Direct Provision⁴ of practical support and should not set itself up to campaign on behalf of children and young people within migration.

3.3.2 What works well, what needs adapting?

The relationship between the Irish Refugee Council and service providers was described as good and in particular that the project coordinator was approachable and willing to listen to constructive comments aimed at improving the project. However there appears to be minimal direct contact with advocates and invariably this is when things aren't going well. Most of the contact with advocates was characterised by dissatisfaction and featured complaints about the service.

A strength was the varied availability and flexibility regarding advocates and in particular that the advocacy service was provided outside usual working hours of 9-5. Advocates were seen as priceless in their role as a friend to the young person and the provision of consistency which they bring was welcomed and seen in marked contrast to the sector norm where many professionals change regularly and where young people thus find it hard to develop meaningful relationships with those working alongside them.

An identified challenge was that of recruiting a diverse group of advocates whilst ensuring that potential advocates had the correct qualities which was expanded upon to cover; a genuine interest in young people, compassionate, able to establish and maintain clear boundaries and a willingness to make a long term commitment to the young person.

Advocates should be offered more regular and quality supervision to ensure that they will always make the right decisions that are in the best interest of the young people with whom they are matched. The view was expressed that those who work with potentially vulnerable young people, whether as salaried employees or as volunteers need to have comprehensive supervision on a regular basis. Similarly it was ventured that consideration should also be given to prioritising which young people would benefit from the services of an advocate. An example was given regarding a young woman who has a full time key worker, receives counselling, is a member of two refugee projects, and attends college and additionally still has an advocate. Is this the best use of resources was the question raised here.

3.3.3 What actions and outputs have emerged from the project?

Agencies felt that the project had released some of the pressure upon them to undertake routine checks establishing whether the young person was well and was coping. This function has in part been informally delegated to the advocate who it is expected would pick up on any issues. However this is in contrast with the view that there is little direct contact between advocates and service providers and begs the question – is everything satisfactory for the young person? Or does contact go via the project coordinator or other Refugee Council employees? Or is there a fundamental misunderstanding and issues that arise are simply not being passed on to the relevant service provider?

⁴ Direct Provision is the government policy for accommodating adult asylum seekers and providing for the food and other daily necessities, such as toiletries. Residents of Direct Provision receive 19.10 per week for other expenses. The centres are all over Ireland and the resident is not typically able to choose the location. The accommodation consists of shared rooms and bathrooms in former hotels, hostels, mobile homes and holiday centres. Some are purpose built.

Young people now have someone who can focus on having a fun and relaxing time with them and their meetings with their advocates get them out of their accommodation, at least for a while, and give them something positive to focus on.

3.3.4 What is the impact on children and young people?

The project provides for a trusted adult to oversee the safety of young people and in doing so adds another layer to their safeguarding and further contributes to reducing the risks of exploitation and abuse. The project has furthered young people's understanding of the complex migration determination and support system and has provided for young people to have a greater role in determining their own status. Whilst there was a view that the project had yet to support a young person through a specific crisis an example was cited where following the death of her mother one young person had 'disappeared'. No one knew where she was and she was not contactable for a while leading to fears for her safety. The young person's advocate was the first point of contact when she decided to re-engage.

3.3.5 What is the impact on the broader community?

Again service providers detail that the project has aided the integration of the young people into Irish society thus making them feel more secure so that they can look to the future with a sense of optimism.

3.4 Summary of findings

Starting on a positive note it is clear that both the young people who have received the service and the advocates who have delivered it have enjoyed the role. Both parties have had fun, interesting times and relationships are described very favourably. Advocates and young people feel that the project is a worthwhile and positive addition to the support available to unaccompanied and separated children in Ireland. Service providers felt that the role of the advocate was complimentary to their role and although some respondents fell short of describing the project as essential all felt it was very useful and worthwhile. Service providers felt that whilst they had good relationships and contacts with the Irish Refugee Council, primarily through the project coordinator, in practice they had minimal contact with advocates and this was invariably when advocates were expressing dissatisfaction with a service.

The term advocate meant very little to the young people who used the service and they didn't necessarily fully understand the role of their advocate. However this is, in some ways immaterial, as they clearly knew that they could turn to their advocate regarding support in relation to their concerns and issues surrounding their immigration procedure and their care provision. Service providers saw advocates more in a befriending role rather than someone who would challenge and raise issues on behalf of young people or input on their behalf into decision making processes. Service providers additionally felt that advocates should not take on a campaigning role where they tried to change or influence current systems but should offer advice and support within the constraints and realities of existing practice and provision. Indeed advocates felt that much of their role had been spent engaging in recreational activities rather than an advocate lobbying for change though they had made some real practical differences for young people. This is not to say that advocates had not supported young people through their engagement with statutory providers, legal representatives and decision makers but that more time had been spent on the social aspects of their relationship. However a significant finding of this research is that advocates felt that they had been unable to contribute to the development of a durable solution regarding the long term plans and provision for young people. To date there is very little evidence that the direct work undertaken by advocates has informed or contributed to the development of the Irish Refugee Council's advocacy or campaigning issues.

There was a general consensus that the role of the advocates was yet another layer regarding the safety of the young people. Whilst it would be complacent to infer that all instances of abuse or exploitation would always be identified, advocates are well positioned to identify safeguarding concerns. The relationships they built with young people created an environment that gave young people an outlet to talk about their safety or tell someone if they were being harmed or were at risk of harm. Young people were clear that they felt safe with their advocates. They also outlined that they were more aware of their rights, which services they were entitled to and how they should expect to be treated. Their sense of self-worth was improved and this could serve as a factor in helping them to guard against and prevent exploitation.

Advocates were clear that they always sought to empower the young people with whom they were matched and that they strove not to make decisions on their behalf preferring to guide them into making their own choices. This was complemented by the views of young people who felt that they were listened to and respected and they further felt that their advocates did not 'take over'. However in practice it was often advocates who suggested activities or who made suggestions to address a particular situation or difficulty and thus a caveat should cautiously be applied when assessing just how empowered young people really are by the project. All parties recognised that strength of the project was the perceived and actual independence of the advocates. Young people trusted their advocates and were confident that confidentiality would be upheld. This in particular allowed for young people to be open with their advocates and allowed a space for them to discuss and assess their options. In a sector where many professionals are managing full and complicated workloads, where staff turnover and movement is considerable and where most care professionals are working with many beneficiaries the consistency and level of personalised engagement that is provided by the advocates to their young 'matches' was most welcome. Specifically the consistency and support that advocates offered to young people post 18 was seen as particularly valuable and was a welcome contrast to the more usual pattern of withdrawal or transfer of support.

The frequency of contact between advocates and young people, and their flexible approach to timing visits, was perceived as about right and felt workable and contact outside the arranged visits was also manageable and had not been used incorrectly. Advocates noted that the young people's sense of time keeping could be problematic and frustrating but this was accepted as something that was unlikely to change and that advocates would need to find ways to work with this rather than find ways to bring about a change in attitude. There was mild dissatisfaction with the financial support given to advocates for each of their visits and a concrete suggestion that expenses should be funded in advance rather than the current system of submitting a post visit claim as this practice means that advocates find themselves out of pocket.

Generally advocates felt supported in their role though they did refer to a sense of working in isolation and it may be opportune to review their supervision arrangements. They felt that they often received little background information in relation to the young people with whom they were matched though again this has not proved to be a problem in practice but may be an area that is also worthy of review particularly within the context of advocates managing risk. All parties were positive about the way the project coordinator delivered the project and that she was approachable and open and focused on delivering a quality service.

The research has been unable to establish in any meaningful way what impact the project has had upon the broader community in which the young people live. Young people reported that they felt they had more understanding of Irish society as a result of their engagement with the project and they also feel better integrated into life in Ireland. However it was difficult to identify any indicators to support this viewpoint.

There is no doubt that the young people who have engaged with the project have benefitted from the advice, support and friendship that they have received from their advocates. What is equally clear is that advocates have had minimal impact upon decisions and indeed decision making processes regarding both the young people's care and welfare planning and their asylum application.

4. CONCLUSION

The project is well managed and engages very well with the young people for whom it seeks to deliver a service. The young people benefit from the service both in terms of practical outputs and by receiving regular contact from a committed and consistent advocate who offers support beyond their 18th birthday. The project contributes to keeping young people safe and young people trust their advocates and feel that they are listened to and their views respected.

There is a divergence on opinions about the role the advocate should play. Some stakeholders feel that in essence the role should be limited to a befriending role whilst others feel that a truer model of advocacy should be applied whereby advocates focus on supporting young people to bring about real change in their circumstances through full participation in decision making processes. In any event the project has, to date, failed to inform the development of a durable solution for the young people who have been matched with an advocate.

Whilst advocates feel they are supported to do their job they work in isolation with potentially vulnerable young people and this support may benefit from being improved to include more regular supervision etc. There is certainly room for improvement in contact between advocates and service providers and both parties may benefit from gaining better insight into each other's roles. The benefits to the community in which the young people live remain hidden and this evaluation is unable to comment with authority on the impact the project has had upon the wider community.

Looking at the project objectives which the evaluation was asked to consider it emerges that both objectives have been partially but not fully met:

Objective one, there has been some improvement in support but significant gaps remain and similarly links between young people and the community have only been partly improved. There is some anecdotal evidence of the project assisting in overcoming past trauma and young people have been somewhat empowered but there is room to further build upon this.

Turning to **Objective two**, the young person's experience of the immigration and child welfare services have been improved but not necessarily significantly so. They have a better, but not thorough, understanding in the processes and there has been some increased participation in the processes but this is not universal. Services provision has got better but there remains room for further improvement.

As a befriending or mentoring project there are many successes for the Irish Refugee Council to celebrate and for other stakeholders to applaud. But large question marks loom starkly over the project's capacity to bring about substantive change through advocacy.

Going forward the Irish Refugee Council need to decide whether to consider reframing the advocacy project as a befriending and social and recreational service or to strengthen the advocacy role, thus making a reality of the role originally envisaged when the project was designed. If the latter it is unlikely that there would be much support from government to give the advocacy role teeth through a formal (statutory) route. Perhaps protocols could be negotiated to allow advocates greater involvement in meetings and other fora where decisions are made about young people and closer links may need to be forged with legal representatives so that practice and decisions detrimental to young people can be challenged. The project would also benefit from the development of closer links with other service providers, particularly at practice level. Perhaps, with permission and vetting by young people, advocates could give feedback to young people's social workers about the sort of things they had been doing together, joint training could be arranged; advocates and other service providers could attend each other's team meetings and advocates could shadow other providers to gain insight and understanding into what they do. Advocates may also benefit from a review in the level of support they receive from the Irish Refugee Council. A more regular supervision timetable could be drafted; more regular team meetings could be held for advocates to give each other peer support and to learn from each other; financial arrangements could be reviewed; and advocates could be given more information about the young people with whom they are matched.

APPENDIX ONE

Irish Refugee Council – Independent Advocacy Project

Project Evaluation - Questionnaires

1. Young people matched with an advocate

- What do you think your advocate is meant to do for you?
- Do they do what you think they are meant to do?
- Does your advocate 'stick up' for your rights, if so in what way?
- Has your advocate helped you?
- If you answered yes to the above question can you say what things they helped you with, for example, with your asylum application, helping you get a lawyer, helping you find somewhere to live etc
- How did they help you, for example, attending meetings with you, making phone calls, writing letters, etc
- Did you feel your advocate listened to you and did what you wanted or did they decide what 'was best' all the time?
- Did you feel safe and comfortable with your advocate?
- Could you trust your advocate and did you feel that they would not tell anyone else about the things that were private for you?
- Do you think your advocate took an interest in your life and that they cared about what happened to you and wanted things to work out well for you?
- How long did you wait to get an advocate?
- How did you contact your advocate, or did you have to wait for them to contact you?
- How often did you see your advocate and is this about right, not often enough or too often?
- If you were unhappy with your advocate would you know how to make a complaint?
- Can you think of anything else your advocate could do for you?

Advocates recruited to work with young people

- What do you think is your role as an advocate?
- How do you think your role is different to that of the other professionals working with child?
- How do you involve children in making decisions?
-
- Is your work led by the views of the young people you work with? If yes outline how
- Do you think that you have brought benefits to the young people you work with? In particular have you helped achieve a 'durable solution'?
- If yes can you outline what these benefits are?
- If no, why do you think it has not been possible to bring about positive change?
- What difficulties have you encountered in undertaking your role?
- Is there anything that you with could be done differently? Or anything that you feel should be added to your role or conversely anything that should be removed from the current role?
- Do you think you get appropriate support to do the job?
- How often do you have contact with young people – is this adequate?
- How would you describe your relationship with others working with the child, and how would you describe your relationship with those in the child's community who are significant in their lives?
- Has there been any observed change in practice as a result of intervention?

Other relevant sector stakeholders

- What is your understanding of the role of the advocate?
- Do you think the role compliments your job; covers areas outside your job, hinders or works at cross-purposes to your job?
- Do you think the advocacy project is necessary for children and if so why?
- If you think the advocacy project is not necessary can you outline why you feel this way
- What benefits do you think the advocacy project has brought for children?
- Or do you think it has had no impact or has made their situation worse. If so why?
- How would you describe your relationship with the projects (i.e. the Irish Refugee Council) and specifically with advocates?
- How do you suggest the project could be improved in order to have a greater impact for young people?

APPENDIX TWO

Separated Children in Europe Programme – Statement of Good Practice (4th Edition)

D3. Appointment of a Guardian

D3.1 Immediately a separated child is identified, or where an individual claims to be a separated child, regardless of whether further assessment of their age is required by the authorities, an independent guardian must be appointed to advise and protect them. The appointed guardian should be consulted and informed regarding all actions taken in relation to the child. Where the child, subject to their age and maturity, gives consent, the guardian should have the authority to represent the child in all planning and decision making processes. Their responsibilities should be to,

- Ensure that all decisions have the child's best interests as a primary consideration
- Ensure the child's views and opinions are considered in all decisions that affect them
- Ensure that the child has suitable care, accommodation, education, language support and health care provision and that they are able to practice their religion
- Ensure the child has suitable legal representation to assist in procedures that will address protection claims and durable solutions
- Explore, together with the child, the possibility of family tracing and reunification
- Assist the child to keep in touch with his or her family where appropriate
- Contribute to a durable solution in the child's best interests
- Provide a link, and ensure transparency and cooperation between the child and the various organisations who may provide them with services
- Engage with the child's informal network of friends and peers
- Consult with and advise the child
- Advocate on the child's behalf

D3.2 Guardians should be appointed until a durable solution has been identified and implemented. This may extend beyond the child's 18th birthday. Where a durable solution is secured before the child turns 18 years old, consideration should be given to the continuation of the role up to the child's 18th birthday if this is appropriate.

D3.3 Procedures for the appointment of a guardian must not be less favourable than the existing national administrative or judicial procedures used for appointing guardians for national children. The individuals carrying out these responsibilities may be drawn from a range of specialist backgrounds. However, in order to carry out their role effectively, guardians will require specialist skills in working with separated children and an understanding of the context of child migration. They must have relevant

childcare expertise and an understanding of the special and cultural needs of separated children. They must receive on-going training and professional support, and undergo police or other appropriate reference checks. Guardians must not hold positions which could lead to a potential conflict of interest with the best interests of the child.

APPENDIX THREE

Closing a Protection Gap – Core Standards for Guardians of Separated Children

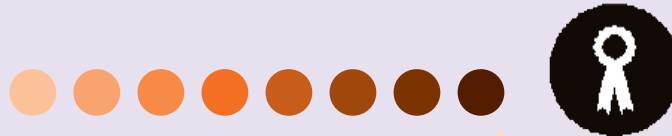
Funding for the pilot was generously provided by:



The **One** Foundation



**CHILDREN'S
RIGHTS
ALLIANCE**



CORE STANDARDS FOR GUARDIANS OF SEPARATED CHILDREN

Standard 1: The guardian advocates for all decisions to be taken in the best interests of the child, aimed at the protection and development of the child.

The guardian is able to advocate, assess and adjust the best interest of the child on a regular basis, involves all relevant actors and ensures that the assessment of the best interest of the child is based on the views of the child and the individual circumstances.

Standard 2: The guardian ensures the child's participation in every decision which affects the child.

The guardian provides information in a child friendly way and checks if the child understands and recalls the information, listens carefully to the child and ensures plans are based on the views of the child and shared with the child, is open to feedback and manages expectations.

Standard 3: The guardian protects the safety of the child.

The guardian gives the highest possible priority to the child's safety, knows the signals of child abuse and trafficking, acts and reports child abuse or trafficking, ensures the child knows he is welcome to voice anything concerning his/her safety, only breaks the confidentiality norm when a child is at risk, ensures victims get appropriate treatment and is open to being monitored on own behaviour.

Standard 4: The guardian acts as an advocate for the rights of the child.

The guardian is an assertive, committed watchdog, dedicated to defending the rights of the child, shows emotional strength, opposes decisions which are not taken in the best interests of the child and pursues fair procedures concerning the child.

Standard 5: The guardian is a bridge between and focal point for the child and other actors involved.

The guardian keeps in contact with all relevant actors, ensures to be informed about all decisions which have an impact on the child and is where necessary present at meetings, assists in establishing links with the child's community and developing relationships that gives the child a sense of belonging to a family or group.

Standard 6: The guardian ensures the timely identification and implementation of a durable solution.

The guardian ensures the identification of a durable and safe solution and challenges others to prove that their proposed solutions take the best interest of the child as a primary consideration, supports the reunification of the child with his/her family and supports the integration of the child in the host country when this is in the best interest of the child, defends safety guarantees when a child is returned and prepares the child for all predictable changes which will occur after turning eighteen.

Standard 7: The guardian treats the child with respect and dignity.

The guardian demonstrates appropriate behavior, treats the child unprejudiced with respect to the child's identity, privacy and cultural differences, supports the child in developing peer relationships and shows a flexible approach tailored to the individual needs of the child.

Standard 8: The guardian forms a relationship with the child built on mutual trust, openness & confidentiality.

The guardian is always honest with the child, keeps his/her promises and keeps all information confidential unless it is necessary to break confidentiality to keep a child safe, pays attention to verbal and nonverbal communication, is empathic towards the child and gives moral support and makes clear to the child that a child who disappears is always welcome to return.

Standard 9: The guardian is accessible.

The guardian can be reached easily, lives near enough of the child to be able to respond quickly to difficulties, sees the child as soon as possible after his/her appointment and pays visits to the child on a frequent basis and communicates in a way which fits the age and development of the child, making use of interpreters whenever necessary and contacts the child to keep in touch also when there is no specific need to do so.

Standard 10: The guardian is equipped with relevant professional knowledge and competences.

The guardian is proactive in identifying learning and development needs, manages his/her caseload and available resources, is accountable, works according to a set methodology, knows personal and professional limits, seeks support and counselling whenever necessary and is open to supervision and monitoring.



