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research article

Social work with unaccompanied asylum-seeking children and young people: resisting the rhetoric

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This article addresses the complex dynamics surrounding unaccompanied asylum-seeking children in the UK. While states are legally bound to provide refuge under such treaties as the 1951 Refugee Convention, political considerations often lead to the implementation of social control mechanisms that may compromise the rights and dignity of displaced individuals. The most recent restrictive immigration legislation, which raises concerns about potential violations of the Refugee Convention, represents the latest in a long line from successive governments to reduce the number of people seeking asylum in the UK. Against this backdrop, drawing on original empirical research, this article offers insights into the unique challenges faced by social workers operating at the immigration–welfare nexus. Focusing on conflicts between control-orientated and welfare-driven practices, the article uncovers how social work is practised within this context. The binary distinctions between control-orientated or welfare-driven practitioners are unhelpful and unrealistic, with the reality much more complex.

Keywords unaccompanied asylum-seeking children • human rights • social work practice

To cite this article: Hadwin, D. and Singh, G. (2024) Social work with unaccompanied asylum-seeking children and young people: resisting the rhetoric, *Critical and Radical Social Work*, XX(XX): 1–17, DOI: 10.1332/20498608Y2024D000000041

Introduction

Between 2016 and 2020, the number of children seeking asylum alone in the UK, without a parent or person with parental responsibility accompanying them averaged approximately 3,000 per year. Often known as unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (UASC) by local authorities and the Home Office, the demographic nature of this group has remained relatively stable, with 90 per cent being male and 80 per cent aged 16–17 years (Refugee Council, 2021). It is only in the last two years that the number of new arrivals has increased, to 4,382 in 2021 and to 5,817 in 2022.

However, they represented 9 per cent and 7 per cent of all asylum applications to the UK in those years, which was less proportionately than in the previous five years (Home Office, 2023), and 7 per cent of the overall 'looked after children' population (Department for Education, 2023). Whether this is an anomaly or the start of a different trend is yet to be established; however, initial indications suggest that the number of newly arrived UASC is decreasing, with a 16 per cent reduction in 2023 from the previous 12-month period (Home Office, 2023).

The reasons for the overall increase in the number of UASC entering the UK are not entirely clear; however, the number of displaced people around the world has also increased in the same period. In 2020, there were estimated to be 82.4 million people displaced from their homes; of those, 26.4 million were refugees and 4.1 million were seeking asylum, having been newly displaced that year (UNHCR, 2021). By the end of 2022, these statistics had increased to 108.4 million displaced people, 35.3 million who were refugees and 5.4 million people who were seeking asylum (UNHCR, 2023). At a time when the world has seen a major upturn in those in need of protection due to war, conflict, other human rights violations and the consequences of climate change, this has been coupled with a rise in the vocality of far-right political parties across Europe, such as in Greece, Austria, Germany, Italy and Hungary (Balla, 2023).

More than a decade ago, then-UK Home Secretary Theresa May introduced the policy of the hostile environment to tackle irregular migration by deterring people from coming to the UK. At that time, this was people generally arriving by being smuggled on lorries; currently, it is those mainly arriving on small boats, as opposed to claiming asylum through one of the few authorised schemes. In addition to the Brexit referendum of 2016, largely fought on an anti-immigration manifesto (Cole, 2019), the Immigration Acts 2014 and 2016 introduced restrictions to bank accounts, housing, education and driving licences, making everyday life difficult for many people (Yeo, 2018). As noted by Mort (2019), although aimed at certain specific groups, the reality was that they increased discrimination against perceived foreignness, affecting both irregular migrants and non-migrants alike.

Being viewed as having a tougher asylum system is a strategy of successive governments, legitimated on the grounds of protecting genuine refugees and tackling the problem of 'bogus' asylum seekers or economic migrants (Masocha and Simpson, 2011). The language used is often dehumanising and exaggerated, with emotive terminology like 'floods', 'deluges', 'flows' and 'swamps' (Goodman et al, 2017) locating migrants as something not to be welcomed and suggesting a criminal motive and identity (Clayton et al, 2019), as well as a threat to British society (Goodman et al, 2017).

In addition to the policies of the hostile environment, austerity has been a key political economic policy to reduce spiralling debt after the global economic crash of 2008/09. This has meant massive cuts in public spending impacting the provisions of local authorities and voluntary organisations. People seeking asylum are part of a system that plays off socially and economically vulnerable individuals and communities against others in a competition for resources, such as welfare, education and housing (Hill et al, 2018). This often plays out as the 'deserving citizen' versus the 'undeserving migrant', with the organisation of welfare reproducing inequalities along the lines of race and nationality (Mort, 2019). These strategies are used to deflect from the actual source of the conflict, which is the unequal social and economic distribution of and forced competition for social and material resources (Hill et al, 2018).

Literature review

Social workers working alongside people at the immigration–welfare nexus is not new. The way services are organised and delivered, the availability of resources, and the quality of the relationship between the worker and the young person all have a bearing on how services are received. It has long been asserted that social workers should critically think about the human rights and social justice consequences of undertaking tasks when young people are subject to immigration control (Humphries, 2004). Social workers should think about strategies for resistance and the seriousness of collusion with racist immigration policies, such as social control through surveillance and providing the Home Office with information, fuelling a climate of hostility (Hayes et al, 2004). This assertion has been repeated over time. Masocha (2015) has asserted that social workers need to be both reflective and reflexive in recognising both the government and media constructs, including how their own discourses reflect this. Doing so could improve practice, addressing concerns about social workers being involved in policies that marginalise people.

Research conducted two decades ago identified that younger children classed as ‘looked after’ and supported by specialist child asylum teams received the most comprehensive support (Wade et al, 2005). More negatively, it identified that some young people struggled to raise issues of concern to them, and initial encounters with some workers were greeted with mistrust and suspicion, a finding evidenced in other research (Hek, 2005; Newbigging and Thomas, 2011; Crafter, Rosen and Metoo, 2021). Similarly, the quality of service that UASC receive from their social workers has been described as a lottery, characterised by chaotic and prejudicial attitudes among staff (Stanley, 2001), or as based on serendipity, a random encounter determined by which social worker the young person happens to meet (Chase and Allsopp, 2020).

Kohli’s (2007) path-breaking work in this area considered how social workers supported UASC to understand what was happening to them, what they understood about silences and secrets, and how they navigated care versus control. He identified three categories of social workers: humanitarians, witnesses and confederates. Values and attitudes varied, with some suspicion evident in some practitioners, but others who were confederates and provided compassionate, relationship-based practice, resisting the social control role of border guard and prioritising the well-being of the young person (Kohli, 2007).

There are two particularly contentious aspects of social work practice in this area: age assessment and decisions to cease support once a young person reaches adulthood. Both are when practitioners are involved in gatekeeping roles (Heughler, 2016). Suspicions regarding the age of young people that position them as undeserving, dangerous, possibly criminal and to be treated with, at best, caution or suspicion (Masocha, 2014; Masocha and Simpson, 2011; Goodman et al, 2017) are rife and can take precedence and limit their access to care.

It is not just in recent years that suspicions about age have arisen. In 2007, research questioned ‘When is a child not a child?’, which considered the implications and consequences of age disputes for children being treated as adults in the asylum process (Crawley, 2007), and Dorling (2013) noted that the culture of disbelief is strongly visible. There is no entirely accurate way to assess age, and physical appearance is of very little value; however, guidelines have been developed to assist social workers in this role, first, by the Association of Directors of Children’s Services

(ADCS, 2015) and then by the British Association of Social Work (BASW, 2023a), whose aim was to promote best practice in this area.

The worst-case scenario is that decisions are made at the point of referral, largely based on physical appearance, leading to children being placed in unsuitable adult accommodation that might include detention, which is a safeguarding risk to them (BBC Newsnight, 2019). This was highlighted by two recent pieces of research that showed significant errors with these initial views. In a sample of 121 young people that the Home Office had labelled as adults on arrival and sent to adult provision, 94 per cent were later identified as children on arrival (Refugee Council, 2022). Likewise, in a smaller piece of research, the Greater Manchester Immigration Aid Unit (2022) identified that 11 out of 15 young people sent to adult accommodation in North-West England were children.

Ending support for young people on the basis of their immigration status is a further point of contention. Local authorities receive insufficient funding from the Home Office to support unaccompanied young people once they leave care, and once a young person exhausts their appeal rights, funding stops altogether after three months. Massive funding gaps have been well documented (East Midlands Councils, 2020), but the impact on young people is huge. Wroe et al (2019) argued that when decisions are made based on immigration status, such as ending local authority support, social care professionals are viewed as the perpetrators of state violence against young people they have previously supported. Decisions to abruptly end support can lead to forced homelessness, and young people experience this like ‘a stab in the back’ (Chase and Allsopp, 2020: 170).

Implications of new immigration legislation for social work practice

The new pieces of immigration legislation are the latest in a long line of legislation that has seen increasingly restrictive measures targeted at those seeking asylum. Up until now, anyone under 18 has been afforded almost the same care and protection by local authorities as any other child, whether they have citizenship or not. The provisions of the Nationality and Borders Act 2022, the Illegal Migration Act 2023 and the Safety of Rwanda Act 2024 mean that there is now an increased likelihood that UASC will be treated differently from their citizen counterparts. Age assessment is contentious, so while the majority of age assessments are still conducted by social workers employed in local authorities, the Nationality and Borders Act 2022 has legislated for the creation of a National Age Assessment Board, whose aims are to undertake some age assessments and provide the expertise to other local authorities to improve consistency and quality (UK Visas and Immigration, 2023). Social workers recruited to this board are undertaking assessments whose primary purpose is to support the decisions regarding asylum and immigration status rather than assessments based on the welfare of the child and to identify their needs (BASW, 2023c). This means that in the Home Office hierarchy, social workers are answerable to the home secretary, and all have presided over increasingly restrictive and inflammatory legislation. So concerned was the BASW about this that it released a statement advising social workers not to apply for or take up offers of being employed in these roles (BASW, 2023b).

It had previously been the pattern for the past decade that approximately one quarter of all UASC who present to local authorities were ‘age assessed’ (Refugee Council, 2020).

In 2021, the percentage increase in the number of age disputes from the previous year was 198 per cent (Refugee Council, 2022), and in 2022, there were 4,675 age disputes raised in a year where there were 5,817 new arrivals (Home Office, 2023). This suggests that questioning age became commonplace in the competition for scarce resources.

If UASC in the care of the local authority are not successful in their asylum claims, there is significant evidence that as they approach adulthood and fear that they might be detained or removed, a number will go missing and not be in contact with local authorities (Wright, 2014; Devenney, 2017; Chase and Allsopp, 2020). The Illegal Migration Act 2023 asserts that those who arrive by irregular means will not be able to apply for asylum and will be removed to their country of origin or a safe third country (Refugee Council, 2023). The Safety of Rwanda Act has now become law, meaning that Rwanda is currently deemed to be a safe country. These pieces of legislation allow the Home Office the power to detain children (they can), though it has yet to be seen whether they will (BASW, 2023c). Once the young person reaches 18, detention and removal become a duty (they must); therefore, when approaching adulthood, already known to be a time of great precarity, undermining the physical and emotional safety of the young person becomes more risky (Devenney, 2017; Chase and Allsopp, 2020; Hadwin, 2022), increasing the likelihood of their disappearing and being more vulnerable to exploitation and abuse from criminal networks (Becoming Adult, 2018; BASW, 2023c).

Based on empirical qualitative research from a PhD study (Hadwin, 2022), this article now considers how this background rhetoric, legislation and policy can play out within local authority social work teams and how social workers navigate the practice and ethical tensions that arise. It suggests that the binary of social workers who are control orientated and those who are welfare driven is unhelpful and unrealistic, as the reality is much more complex.

Methodology

The qualitative research used standpoint theory (Harding, 1986; Smith, 1988) to ascertain the lived experience of young people subject to immigration control. Standpoint theory asserts that it is only through active engagement with the world that knowledge is gained. It is asserted that people less privileged in society have a greater understanding of social reality because their experiences expose them to a view of their circumstances that those in more powerful social positions do not have (Rolin, 2009). This theoretical position also chimes with the centrality of the lived experience of the individual within social work practice. To gain this understanding, six former UASC, aged between 18 and 25, attended either a one-to-one interview or a focus group to provide their views about their experiences, and representatives from four voluntary sector organisations who provided support services to UASC separate from statutory agencies were interviewed. Having ascertained the young people's lived experience (see Hadwin, 2022), a focus group consisting of three social work managers took place and then individual interviews were conducted with social work managers, social workers and personal advisors (a role created by the Children [Leaving Care] Act 2000 to provide continued support to care-experienced young people up until the age of 25). The managers and social workers were all qualified and registered social workers. None of the personal advisors were social workers, but all were supervised by social workers. In addition to the three managers in the focus

group, a total of 15 practitioners (four managers, six social workers and five personal advisors) were interviewed.

All but one of the young people were accessed through a gatekeeper within one of the voluntary sector organisations, with the other contacted through their involvement in a different research project. The social work practitioners were recruited from three local authorities within one subregion of England: one city, one rural and one town council. Involvement in the research was entirely voluntary. The data were collected prior to the introduction of the latest immigration legislation.

In terms of positionality, one of the authors has extensive experience working in a management role in local authorities with this group of young people and has delivered training to social workers. By the time the data were collected, the author had left local authority practice and was a full-time academic; however, they arguably had both insider status, in that they had access to networks and used a purposive sampling strategy, and outsider status, on the basis that they were no longer employed within this role. Ethical approval was obtained from the supervising university; in addition, the rural council also had their own ethical approval process. The data were then transcribed, and a reflexive thematic analysis was undertaken (Braun and Clarke, 2013). In the first instance, this was completed for each stage with each group outlined earlier before a thematic analysis compared all the stages of the research.

Results

In the main, the practitioner respondents who volunteered to take part in the research were motivated to be involved, often interested and engaged, and may have wanted to present a particular view of themselves. This can also bias the findings towards those with a more positive orientation, as identified by other social work researchers in this area (Kohli, 2007; Heugler, 2016). Bearing this in mind, in addition to practitioners stating their views directly, other opportunities to ascertain the reality of practice were through the interviews with the different stakeholders, including the young people and voluntary sector respondents, and within the examples practitioners gave to illustrate their views.

The starting point for the analysis of the practitioners' perspectives were the motivations of individual workers to work with UASC. These detail what workers bring to the job: their knowledge, skills and values based on their identity and past experiences. Of the 15 practitioner respondents in the semi-structured interviews, two thirds identified that it was their own personal experiences or learning on the job that sparked their interest. Factors included lived experience of the asylum and immigration systems, their own racial and cultural backgrounds, the experiences of family members, or opportunities to work with UASC through their social work placements when they were students. This aligns with Kohli's (2007) research, whereby the practitioners' personal experiences prepared them to enter the young people's worlds with empathy and helped them form the foundation of the relationship. For the remaining third, learning on the job had enabled them to be exposed to the reality of young people's experiences.

Such was the strength of feeling in this group that over half of the social workers and personal advisors spoke about 'loving' their job. The reasons given were that working with young people from a rich diversity of cultural backgrounds was a 'real privilege', which had also been good for workers' own development as human beings.

This sentiment was echoed by a personal advisor: 'We do this kind of work because we're drawn to it, and for me, it is a blessing ... when they do open up to you and tell you things, it does feel like a privilege ... it helps you to be more appreciative of your own life.' In addition, working with young people separated from their parents and trying to make their own way in life against the backdrop of the political and media rhetoric motivated workers to do their best. The job offered an opportunity to learn something new, though practitioners found it personally and professionally challenging, as well as rewarding.

Positive motivation can be helpful in terms of providing the necessary energy and impetus for working in this complex area; however, it is just one factor and does not necessarily equate to understanding the issues or being able to provide support tailored to meet the identified needs of the individual young person. Being able to do that is determined by the interplay of how government legislation and policy are interpreted at both the organisational and individual levels. Not all practitioners are positively orientated towards UASC, and even for those who are, sustaining the positivity while working with the realities of immigration control was a challenge.

Control-orientated practice: working at the immigration-welfare interface

Aspects of practice defined as control orientated were those parts of practice that involved some aspect of gatekeeping and surveillance or when immigration legislation took priority over welfare. These included: the tone of leadership; responses to new arrivals, undertaking age assessments and determining credibility; the relationship with the Home Office; preparing young people for adulthood; and ending support based on immigration status.

The tone of leadership

The tone of leadership impacted whether young people were able to access services and the level of provision received. The managers' values and attitudes influenced the practice within the team. Four of the five managers who took part in the semi-structured interviews appeared to be welfare driven, even though they were concerned about budgeting pressures impacting the service. They spoke positively about the young people, were able to identify issues for them and dilemmas and challenges for workers, and considered areas for improvement. They presided over changes to equalise allowances to all children in care regardless of immigration status, encouraged social workers and personal advisors to challenge if they found practice to be unjust, and made choices about providing continued support regardless of immigration status.

These managers were still practising within an underfunded system, so while their values and attitudes were congruent with social work values, they still had to make difficult decisions. A stark example of this was the justification of the use of unregulated placements, where children are placed in semi-independent accommodation that is not subject to an inspection and, in many instances, where there is no carer on site. Justifications were on the basis of cost (as it is much cheaper than foster care or residential care) and that their location meant that UASC could support each other by having access to communities meeting their religious, cultural and linguistic needs.

Only one manager interviewed for the research, the least experienced, whose knowledge base was limited, set a different tone. They came across as emotionally distant, referring to the young people as ‘they’ or ‘them’ and talking dispassionately about signposting and processing. However, respondents from one local authority provided an example where a previous manager’s values and attitudes were problematic. The respondents found it very difficult to challenge them, and their negative values and misinformed approach about what could and could not be provided shaped service provision, with overt attention to keeping the costs down meaning that austerity appeared to be a mask for hostility, as some of the responses in the following demonstrate.

Response to new arrivals, age assessment and determining the credibility of young people's accounts

It is a challenge for local authorities to provide services to UASC when budgets are at breaking point. Although managers were responsible for managing those budgets, practitioners across all roles were mindful of resourcing pressures. Gatekeeping was essential to ensure that those who were eligible for a service received one and those who did not were refused.

Negative messages associated with the hostile environment had permeated. Examples of this came from respondents in each of the three local authorities. There was ‘mistrust of asylum seekers and refugees in general ... [and] quite negative practice’ (manager), and ‘there are people out there who may have taken advantage of the systems ... you do hear certain concerns in the office ... what their real intentions are of coming over in this country’ (personal advisor).

One of the defining factors was whether the local authority believed them to be a child at the point of referral as a new arrival. Although numerous court judgments about age assessment have stated that physical appearance is of very little value in determining age (for detail, see [Dorling, 2013](#); [ADCS, 2015](#); [BASW, 2023c](#)), at the outset, there is minimal evidence from which to draw conclusions. One manager reported that ‘if workers think they are dealing with an adult, they might start treating them like an adult, be less supportive, more forceful with them or rude’. This suggests that this was a normalised, accepted response and implies some justification of oppressive behaviour based on perceived age. In one of the local authorities, there was evidence that turning young people away at the point of referral based on physical appearance was commonplace:

I’ve also heard from managers and workers, ‘Oh, I like him, keep him under 18’.... They were not age assessed the way they should be.... You can’t do your age assessment just by looking at someone’s face when they have arrived and not slept for a week, and you say, ‘I think he’s 14 or I think he’s 18 years old.’ This was happening a lot here. More than 100 young people have been affected by that kind of decision.

Issues of credibility are at the heart of age assessment. If practitioners had doubts about not only an unaccompanied asylum-seeking child’s age but also their asylum narrative, this could raise suspicions about whether they were also accessing a service (welfare) to which they had no entitlement.

Even though this practice was primarily about social control, there was evidence of more welfare-driven practice indicating compassion and including an acknowledgement of the internal tensions evoked. When the respondents provided negative examples, they distanced themselves from the practice they described and instead apportioned it as something they had witnessed. The personal advisor who explained the practice of turning away young people at the point of referral was empathetic and expressed shock when favouritism was shown to newly arrived young people who had friendly personalities and were nice to the duty worker that day, whereas the ones who were tired, scared and perhaps did not understand the cultural nuances were more likely to be refused a service. However, he felt powerless to change what was happening because of the tone of leadership of the team at the time. Another social worker spoke of resisting the temptation to be part of the age-related banter, recognising the psychological and other impacts of being separated from their families, regardless of age.

The relationship with the Home Office

Locating welfare professionals within the Home Office is problematic. Being separate from the Home Office was an important distinction, as stated by one of the managers: 'We're not the Home Office; we're not here to make a decision about whether you can stay.' The different functions between the agencies have become increasingly blurred, however, and more so since the establishment of the National Age Assessment Board, with some teams co-located. Problematic examples provided by the young people and voluntary sector agencies supporting them were that local authority staff were reported to be sharing inappropriate information with the Home Office that was factually wrong and had the potential to derail their asylum claim.

Boundaries between the Home Office and social work practitioners were something that was raised across all roles in all local authorities and was an aspect of practice that caused some uncertainty and anxiety. Managers had the greatest grasp of this relationship and seemed assured of their position. The Home Office was described as a key partner, but it was recognised that they also had a different organisational culture. As a manager asserted, '[While] we have a duty to work with other organisations ... we have a duty to our care leavers as well.' In terms of the sharing of information between agencies, social workers and personal advisors were to:

Seek advice, and we would discuss it before they divulge anything that could be potentially dangerous for that young person personally. I would never encourage anybody to lie, you know, we're a statutory service, I would never encourage any worker to actively mislead the government or the Home Office.... I would ask them to consider what they are sharing and how that affects the young person. (Manager)

Practitioner responses evidenced that they were not certain what they were required to share legally as opposed to what was discretionary. Given the lack of clarity, it is not surprising that practitioners were nervous about 'putting their foot in it' (personal advisor). The same personal advisor who had shown highly empathetic responses to young people as new arrivals thought that they had no choice but to provide the Home Office with any information requested, particularly where asylum claims

failed. As a result, four young people with whom they worked had been detained and removed, whereas another personal advisor within the same team who used stalling and delaying strategies had had no young people detained and removed. This shows that the binary distinctions between being control orientated and welfare driven can be problematic, and while highly attuned and empathetic in one aspect, the same worker can be compliant and uncertain in another.

Sharing information was not one-way, and it was sometimes helpful for local authority practitioners to seek information from the Home Office, particularly when young people had disengaged from local authority support. Even then, practitioners were sensitive and wary of doing anything about raising the profile of the young person; as one personal advisor stated, she needed to think about ‘the repercussions of that’.

Preparing young people for adulthood based on their immigration status

As UASC approached adulthood and personal advisors were allocated to support them, suspicions about age followed them. Two personal advisors were adamant that the young people they were working with were older than their stated age. One joked that they had said to a young person: ‘You’re older than you are, than we’ve got you down as, and I think that you are struggling to take anything that I say as any authority because you know you’re older than you are.’ The other, in a different local authority, was convinced that young people say they are younger than they are to access a service to which they are not entitled, explaining that ‘age assessment [is] more an art than a science’.

Having said that, the initial responsibility for preparing UASC for adulthood, undertaking assessments and preparing pathway plans lay with the social worker once a young person had reached age 16. The statutory guidance directs workers to consider multiple options of where an unaccompanied asylum-seeking child’s future might be dependent on immigration status (Department for Education, 2017) and consequently their subsequent rights and entitlements. Undertaking pathway planning with an unaccompanied asylum-seeking child whose immigration status is precarious can be challenging given that a return to the country of origin (one of the options to consider) is often extremely emotionally difficult for the young person to comprehend.

It was in discussing these different options that respondents repeated the control-orientated rhetoric of the government that the young people would be detained and removed, even though their own practice experience provided them with contrary evidence. In the sample of managers interviewed, including one who had worked with UASC for 13 years, the managers only knew of a combined total of 12 young people across the three local authorities who had been returned to their country of origin on becoming ‘appeal rights exhausted’. Given that this is the reality, much greater attention arguably needs to be given to how young people survive prolonged periods of uncertainty and precarity.

Further control-orientated practice was evident when a respondent expressed that the pathway plan is ‘not about the young person really; it’s about what we’re prepared to give you, and so the whole process is a little bit flawed’ (personal advisor). Given this reality, over half the social workers, as well as some personal advisors, viewed the actual document as of limited use to the young people, who are often disengaged from the process and do not understand its purpose.

Ending support based on immigration status

Ending support just because of a young person's immigration status is a main aspect of practice that separates unaccompanied young people from their citizen counterparts. Currently, many local authorities are now recognising care experience as a protected characteristic under equalities legislation. Within the manager respondents, there was recognition that there was widespread variation and misunderstanding about practice across local authorities and whether or not it was legal to continue to support a young person under leaving care or other legislation, such as mental health legislation, if they had become appeal rights exhausted. One manager's attendance at a national meeting of over 100 local authorities detailed the different levels of support, attitudes and opinions expressed: 'Every local authority that fed back was extremely different across the board ... most of the time ... there's some consistency, you know, there's the odd person that does it differently, but there wasn't with that, it was very controversial.... It's like a postcode lottery.' While the managers within this sample expressed some clarity as to their approach, this had not been transmitted to the practitioners within their teams, who expressed some confusion.

Social workers and personal advisors expressed their own views of what they thought should happen when young people became appeal rights exhausted, and practice on the ground varied, both within teams and across local authorities. One social worker identified that they were grappling with the issue:

My view would be if somebody is here unlawfully and they have no recourse to public funds, we are a publicly funded organisation, so can we hand on heart use taxpayers' money to support someone remaining illegally in the UK?... I haven't come to a final conclusion about that; I'm still chewing that one over in my subconscious.

Having no recourse to public funds (certain welfare benefits) is different to being able to receive social work support (a publicly funded organisation). This backs up [Farmer's \(2018\)](#) analysis, whereby she identified that there was widespread confusion about what constituted a public fund, which was used to justify gatekeeping services and refusing support.

There was clear confusion, but in ending support, practitioners looked to voluntary sector organisations to fill the gaps. On an emotional level, there was some relief with voluntary agencies, which were viewed as an 'absolute godsend' (manager).

Strategies to manage the tension

Respondents identified several strategies to manage the tensions evoked. The young people themselves estimated that 20 per cent of workers were hostile and 80 per cent were supportive. The range of coping strategies evidenced were: change of worker; emotional distancing; use of self as a frame of reference; placing hopes in the young person's agency; and engaging in acts of resistance.

Change of worker was something the young people raised as a difficulty for them; however, to a social worker, knowing that the young people were going to get a new

worker at 18 could provide relief. The work did not feel as open-ended, and as one social worker put it, they were:

spared witnessing directly the impact that becoming a care leaver has on an unaccompanied asylum-seeking child.... I think ARE [appeal rights exhausted] young people are treated as less than human on the basis that they haven't got status, and I don't think that's what I came into social work to do.... I suppose handing them over at 18 has kept me in the role a little longer than I would have if I had to see the natural conclusion of that.

The two most experienced social workers, with five and nine years of practice experience, respectively, identified the negative personal impact of longer-term working with UASC, managed by emotional distancing. This included presenting options to an unaccompanied asylum-seeking child in a matter-of-fact way rather than getting incensed by the injustice of it all. The other experienced worker stated that he had developed resilience and acclimatised to the reality, so he did not have 'those qualms anymore', as from his value base, it was better to have the conversations to 'equip them with truth and reality so they can start thinking clearly about those things or the seeds of thinking clearly about them are planted'.

These experienced social workers grappled with how they processed what they witnessed, and early views of being able to make a significant difference had dissipated:

I think you get to a point in social work when you realise you're probably just going to contain people until they get to 18 and then you pass them on and let them sink or swim, and it's quite a cruel system ... we'll just leave them to rot, basically, in the UK, with no support ... these are the things that you carry round with you but you have to negotiate or you have to reconcile within yourself as a practitioner. You might make jokes and become hard-faced, but if you actually scratch the surface, all this is bubbling away in informing your view and your thought process and about how you're approaching practice ... you can understand why people burn out. (Social Worker)

He felt that he coped through some emotional distancing, echoed by the other experienced worker, who thought that it was not an entirely negative strategy and could be viewed as helpful in containing the young people:

When I first started, I was a bit more naive and tried to give young people reassurances that were not mine to give.... Now, I guess, it's making sure I remain compassionate, even though I'm more clear with it.... I got to a stage a while ago where I was feeling quite burnt out.... I don't think I was necessarily dis-compassionate towards young people but maybe a bit cool and, like, this is the facts, this is the script.

The less experienced workers with a limited knowledge base seemed the least emotionally affected.

It was the personal advisors, as opposed to the social workers, who were usually involved when the decision was made to end services. There was a high level of empathy demonstrated in their responses, and personal advisors witnessed young

people's distress at having their lives turned upside down. To some extent, the workers felt powerless to be able to offer anything tangible to make the situation better.

Personal advisors were also the ones who tended to make sense of the issues by using their own experience as a frame of reference. One of the personal advisors discussed how her cultural identity as a black worker was a central feature of her approach, brought a greater depth of understanding and communication, and enabled a lot of things to be unsaid. Another within the same local authority was able to make comparisons between her daughter's relative freedom and the limitations on young people preventing them from being able to continue with education or pursue other training or employment options due to their immigration status. She found it deeply upsetting knowing there was little that she could do.

For those practitioners with lived experience of the asylum system, the reality of the impact of control-orientated policies on young people's lives was even more personal, and the thought that young people might be returned to their countries of origin was:

so draining and exhausting. I think, for me, it makes it ten times more difficult being someone from [name of country], and I know that it is not safe to be returned to [country], but I'm so helpless that I can't even say to the young person that, 'I know it's not safe, but you have to go now.... I'm sorry I can't help you.' So very, very difficult. Very difficult. (Personal Advisor)

It is evident in the previous responses that rather than being control orientated themselves, many workers expressed compassion and sensitivity and struggled to be alongside young people within a system that perpetrated such harm to their opportunities and emotional well-being. An additional strategy was placing hope in the young person's agency. They talked about the young people's resilience, having already survived significant trauma, commenting that, 'They do tend to find other people in the community who are willing to help and support them, so they do tend to support each other.... They're very resilient' (Personal Advisor).

The other more proactive way of coping was to actively try to resist the rhetoric and interrupt the system. In addition to strategies of managing the relationship between the Home Office and local authorities and arguing to equalise provision, as described earlier, there were both overt and covert ways of resistance. Examples included: refusing to give their opinion on age assessments; encouraging and supporting the young people to contact their local members of Parliament (MPs) to challenge Home Office delays; and exercising some discretion on ending support. All these acts of resistance were carried out overtly, with the full knowledge and approval of managers.

It was the decision to cut off support that saw more covert acts of resistance. Some workers were determined that they would continue to be available to young people even if the service had technically ended and the case was closed, the motivator being responding to human suffering: 'I'm not planning on cutting contact.... It doesn't take a lot of time, you know, just a couple of texts, isn't it? Or, you bump into them when out and about. It's not like I'm working with them as part of my working day' (personal advisor). There was evidence that some workers developed an understanding with some young people about the rules of communication, as explained here:

They do tend to go underground, and I'm honest with them as well, I say to them, I don't know whether I should say, but I say, 'Don't tell me where

you're living because if you do and the Home Office ask, I have to share it?... I'd pre-warn people just in case. I don't need to know where they're living particularly; I need to know they're OK. (Personal Advisor)

For some, this meant that at least some level of contact could be maintained without jeopardising each other's position.

Conclusion

While moral panics about asylum and immigration have historically been exploited by the Right to gain popularity, recent years have seen a heightened focus on the plight of UASC subjected to increasingly restrictive controls and surveillance. The enactment of the immigration legislation, by its nature, control orientated, severely restricts young people's life chances and is a breach of their human rights. It is against this backdrop that local authority social care practitioners continue to face ethical dilemmas as they balance their statutory duties to promote the human rights and welfare of vulnerable children, on the one hand, and restrictive and coercive government policies, on the other. Drawing insights from this small-scale qualitative research project, this article has shed light on how these tensions are navigated in resisting the rhetoric. There was some evidence of poor practice within this area, though a high level of motivation, commitment, sensitivity and compassion was also evidenced. These findings challenge the suggestion in the social work literature that practitioners are positioned on the binary of being either control orientated or welfare driven, with the picture on the front line being much messier.

As evidenced earlier, witnessing the limiting reality of these policies on the lives of young people and responding with human kindness, even though they often felt powerless themselves, was a way that practitioners could be alongside young people in this control-orientated sphere. The research does offer hope and positive options for social care professionals working alongside young people subject to state control, including how to manage the tensions engendered, maintain a commitment to ethics and situate their practice within a broader understanding of wider moral panics surrounding the issue of asylum and immigration.

Funding

The authors received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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