

“They made me
feel like myself.”

a joint **Young Roots** and
Helen Bamber Foundation
report on age disputes and
supporting young people

Introduction

“When I came to Young Roots,
they treated me different.
They listened to me more.
When I come to them,
they made me feel like myself,
like I could talk to them.
I talked a lot to the doctor
[HBF psychologist]
about this too.
They give me time
to explain my feelings,
the things that
happened to me.”



Assessing age is a complex and challenging process and can be confusing and traumatising for the young person involved.

In the absence of formal identification, the ages of young people arriving in the UK to seek safety are often questioned. They may be interviewed and assessed by different professionals trying to decide how old they are.

Too many children have their age disbelieved and are subjected to an often-flawed age determination process that too often wrongly finds children to be adults. This denies children the rights, care and protection to which they are entitled.

This report shows how, when age assessments are required, the process can be improved by using an ongoing, trauma-informed, and holistic approach that can allow professionals to build an authentic picture of a young person's age.

The model of support provided by Young Roots' youthworkers, caseworkers and Helen Bamber Foundation psychologists, has proven to be crucial both in helping young people through the process, and in providing high quality evidence that might be used in assessments.

This report demonstrates the value of organisations and individuals adopting a similar approach to supporting young people in order to increase the likelihood that children will rightly be recognised as children, and to reduce the harm of the age assessment process.

The report also shows that more effective and appropriate age determinations processes are possible if the insights and expertise of professionals engaged in this holistic support model are taken into account and given appropriate weight.

About Young Roots and the Helen Bamber Foundation

Young Roots is a charity that specialises in supporting young asylum seekers and refugees.

It supports young people aged 11 to 25. It has three delivery areas, all in London – Croydon, Brent and King's Cross – through which it provides practical and emotional support and advocacy through a one-to-one Casework service, and aims to reduce isolation and support wellbeing through a Youth Development programme.

Between January 2020 and December 2023, Young Roots' services were accessed by 2,259 young refugees and asylum seeker from over 70 countries. Currently, its services are accessed by an average of 100 young people per week.

The Helen Bamber Foundation is a specialist clinical and human rights charity that works with survivors of trafficking, torture and other forms of extreme human cruelty.

Its multidisciplinary and clinical team provides a bespoke Model of Integrated Care for survivors which includes medico-legal documentation of physical and psychological injuries; specialist therapeutic care; a medical advisory service; a countertrafficking programme; housing and welfare advice; legal protection advice; and community integration activities and services.



Young Roots runs multi-agency weekly drop-in sessions for young refugees and asylum seekers, known as ‘Advice and Support Hubs’, that run alongside their youth educational activities.

The model was devised in response to the difficulties young refugees and asylum seekers often face in accessing education, mental health support, legal advice and social interaction.

As part of the Hub model in Brent, the Helen Bamber Foundation provides specialist psychological trauma assessments and therapies to young people who present with mental health difficulties, many of whom are undergoing stressful and confusing to them age assessments and age dispute processes.

The provision of timely, flexible, trauma-informed assessments and interventions has been significant in informing the network of professionals around young people on the needs and risks that they present with. These assessments and interventions have helped to stabilise high levels of distress, increased young people’s psychosocial coping resources, and helped them transition towards a path of recovery. It is this model of practice which has informed the findings of this report.

Why are children and young people's ages assessed?

The concept of childhood differs across the world, as does the importance placed on chronological age and the means of recording it.

Age is not celebrated or marked in the same way in different cultures: in some countries, births are not always registered and different measures are used in certain communities to mark particular life stages and transitions.

This has given rise to a problem specific for children who come to the UK on their own from countries such as Afghanistan, Sudan and Eritrea, and claim asylum or make other immigration applications. Many of these children are unable to prove their date of birth with official identity documents, such as a passport or birth certificate, because they either no longer have them or never had them in the first place. Some may have had to use false documentation as the only safe means of leaving their countries, or had it provided to them by smugglers and traffickers.

Questions over age can also arise because of a lack of understanding of the way in which dates of birth and calendars are calculated in other cultures, and associated confusion and misunderstandings over what is being said by a child about their age.

In the absence of documentation, it is extremely difficult to determine a child's age, especially based on appearance alone. This is particularly the case for children from different countries: even those from similar ethnic backgrounds, who have grown up in the same social and economic environment, may display significant physical, emotional and developmental differences. These differences can be exacerbated by a child's experiences of adversity, conflict, and violence in their country of origin and during their journey to the UK.¹

¹ See Refugee and Migrant Children's Consortium [Age assessment proposals in the New Plan for Immigration](#) June 2021

Despite the widely recognised difficulties in assessing age, many children are subject to age assessment procedures. The question of age in the immigration system in the UK is of fundamental importance as it determines how a young person is treated in all areas of their life in the UK: whether they are supported by children's services; their access to education; whether they are provided with asylum support by the Home Office and dispersed to a different part of the UK; and whether they are accommodated or detained with adults. Age also determines how their asylum or immigration application is processed and decided.² For unaccompanied children in the immigration system, having their age recognised is fundamental to them receiving the support and protection they need.

Successive UK governments have said age assessments are conducted for safeguarding purposes, but their approaches to assessing age have resulted in hundreds of children being wrongly treated as adults and placed alone in accommodation with adults of all ages, or worse still in immigration detention.³

This is a far greater safeguarding concern than someone in their early twenties being placed in supervised accommodation with older teenagers. Furthermore, a significant number of disputes are not over whether the individual is a child or an adult, but over the exact age of the child, for example, whether they are 15 or 17. Whether the child is under or over 16 often has implications for the level and type of they receive under the Children Act 1989, with many children seeking asylum aged 16 or over placed in unregulated semi-independent accommodation with more limited support rather than in family-based foster care. It will also have an impact on leaving care support. Years can be spent in dispute over the question of a year or two, while all the time the child potentially receives an inadequate form of support, and instead has to battle with the very people tasked to look after them.



² See Home Office, [Assessing age for asylum applicants](#), for domestic policy. Also, UNCRC Articles 22 and 37(1); Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict; CRC General Comment Number 6 on the Treatment of Unaccompanied and Separated Children Outside their Countries of Origin; UNHCR Guidelines on International Protection Number 8: Child asylum claims under articles 1(a)2 and 1(f) of the 1951 convention and/or 1967 protocol relating to the status of refugees.

³ Helen Bamber Foundation, Humans for Rights Network and Refugee Council, [Forced Adulthood: The Home Office's incorrect determination of age and how this leaves child refugees at risk](#), 2024

The age assessment process



The Home Office will come to a view on age simply based on an individual's "appearance and demeanour" – deciding to:

- treat the child as the age they say they are; OR
- treat them as a child but 'dispute' their age and refer them to a local authority for further assessment; OR
- treat them as an adult (*if their "physical appearance and demeanour very strongly suggest they are significantly over 18"*) and move them straight to adult accommodation/detention.⁴

Much more detailed age assessments are carried out by local authority social workers as part of their duty to support children under the Children Act 1989 (or equivalent in devolved administrations) and ensure that any service a child requires is appropriate to their age and assessed needs. In short, this involves gathering information through speaking with the individual, and the network of professionals and carers who might be engaging them, to gather evidence from which to take a view on age. These detailed assessments require safeguards set out in case law and guidance, such as the right to an 'appropriate adult' when a child is being interviewed, and a 'minded to' meeting where a child will be informed of the decision that is likely to be made and given an opportunity to respond.

Statutory guidance for England currently makes it clear that:

*"Where an age assessment is required, local authorities must adhere to standards established within case law. Age assessments should only be carried out where there is reason to doubt that the individual is the age they claim. Age assessments should not be a routine part of a local authority's assessment of unaccompanied or trafficked children. Further advice and practice guidance can be found in the Age Assessment Guidance, published by the Association of Directors of Children's Services (ADCS)."*⁵

Age assessments remain a challenging area, with wide variation in practice across local authorities and ongoing problems with children being treated as adults by both the Home Office and local authorities, resulting in them not receiving the support and protection they need. The age assessment process itself can also cause a lot of anxiety, confusion and frustration for many vulnerable children, and have a negative impact on their already poor mental health. It can prevent them from accessing school or college whilst their age is disputed, isolate them from peers and prevent them from integrating and accessing educational opportunities. Many children do not understand the process, and are harmed and re-traumatised by it. Despite this, increasing numbers of children are having their ages questioned and being forced to undergo some form of further assessment.

⁴ Home Office, [Assessing age for asylum applicants: caseworker guidance](#)

⁵ Department for Education, [Care of unaccompanied migrant children and child victims of modern slavery](#), 2017. There also exists age assessment practice guidance written by a multi-agency working group and published by the Scottish government in March 2018 and a Welsh age assessment toolkit published by the Wales Strategic Migration Partnership. There is currently no age assessment guidance in Northern Ireland.

The government has sought to address some of these challenges through Part 4 of the Nationality and Borders Act 2022.

However, NGOs working on this issue have highlighted that the measures in the Act will:

- increase the number of children whose ages are disputed, even when there are no reasons to doubt the age the child says they are;
- give the Home Office too much power to determine who assesses age, when and how, undermining the role of local authority social workers as child protection experts; and
- give the government the power to use ‘scientific’ methods to assess age that may be inaccurate and harmful, and children will have no choice but to consent to them.⁶

The Act introduced a National Age Assessment Board (NAAB) that sits within the Home Office and carries out age assessments on behalf of local authorities. The NAAB was launched in March 2023, but has limited capacity and concerns have been raised that social workers employed by NAAB risk having their objectivity undermined by political priorities.⁷

In 2023 there were **7,290** unaccompanied children looked after by local authorities in England – most (86%) are aged 16 and 17 and 96% are male.⁸

Between July 2022 and June 2023, **5,186** unaccompanied children were registered as claiming asylum in the UK, with the main countries of origin including Afghanistan, Sudan, Eritrea and Albania.⁹

In that period, **4,850** individuals had their ages challenged and, of those where the age dispute was ‘resolved’ (4,188), 51% (2,151) were found to be children. However, of the 49% found to be 18, a proportion will have been ‘deemed’ adults following a ‘visual’ Home Office assessment that have been found to be fundamentally flawed.¹⁰

Recent research by the Refugee Council, Helen Bamber Foundation and Humans for Rights Network showed that over an 18 month period (January 2022 to June 2023) at least **1,300** refugee children were placed in unsupervised adult accommodation and detention after being wrongly age assessed on arrival in the UK.¹¹

⁶ [Refugee and Migrant Children’s Consortium briefings on Part 4 \(age assessments\) of the Nationality and Borders Bill](#) | Helen Bamber

⁷ [British Association of Social Workers, UK Statement: National Age Assessment Board, March 2023](#)

⁸ [Children looked after in England including adoptions, Reporting year 2023 – Explore education statistics – GOV.UK](#)

⁹ [Home Office data tables: Asy_D01 – Asylum applications raised, by nationality, age, sex, UASC, applicant type, and location of application](#)

¹⁰ [age-disputes-datasets-sep-2023.xlsx \(live.com\)](#) In the data an age dispute case refers to an applicant who does not have credible documentary or other persuasive evidence to demonstrate their age claimed, whose claim to be a child is doubted by the Home Office and, as a result, there is a need for the Home Office to assess their age. ‘Age dispute resolved’ relates to the number of age disputes marked as complete, by date of completion, and may relate to an age dispute raised in an earlier period. An age dispute could, for example, be resolved: following a Merton compliant age assessment; receipt of credible and clear documentary evidence of age; a judicial finding on age; following a determination by two Home Office officers that the person’s physical appearance and demeanour very strongly suggests they are significantly over the age of 18; or, where the reasons for raising an age dispute no longer apply.

¹¹ [Helen Bamber Foundation, Humans for Rights Network and Refugee Council, Forced Adulthood: The Home Office’s incorrect determination of age and how this leaves child refugees at risk, 2024](#)

The psychological impact of age disputes

Young people have used the safe, trauma-informed settings at Young Roots as a forum to explore the impact that past trauma and adversity has had on them, as well as the role that current stressors, including age disputes, have on their mental health difficulties.

Age disputes can activate high levels of stress, confusion, and uncertainty. They can affect children's trust towards professionals and the overall systems, which in turn can impact their ability to engage with other support systems, such as physical and mental health support, education, and community support. The age assessment itself can involve multiple lengthy interviews in which the young person is asked in detail about their upbringing, and past experiences both in their country of origin and on their journey to the UK. This can activate painful and avoided memories and can be therefore re-traumatising. Importantly, age disputes can maintain and/or exacerbate pre-existing psychological vulnerabilities or difficulties, including depression, anxiety, and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder.

In some extreme cases, age disputes can be particularly re-traumatising for young people, and contribute to the development of severe mental health difficulties, such as debilitating social anxiety, panic disorder, paranoia, externalising problems, self-harm, and suicidality. Moreover, worry and preoccupation about the outcomes of age disputes, as well as practical insecurity and withholding of much needed support, can interfere with their ability to meaningfully engage in psychological treatment and achieve their recovery aims.

Further, most children and adolescents who seek asylum have in the past experienced severe traumatisation, childhood abuse or neglect, and/or traumatic separation or loss of primary caregivers. As such, they present with attachment and interpersonal difficulties, and require the consistent and reliable support of trusted adults in order to heal from developmental trauma, be able to form and maintain relationships with others, and repair their sense of self-worth. Unfortunately, whilst local authorities have the opportunity to provide safe spaces for recovery and healing, the adversarial nature of age disputes can cause irreparable damage to the relationship of children with their social workers that can then reinforce difficulties with trust, attachment, and interpersonal relationships.



Supporting young people whose ages have been disputed

Young Roots' Hub model has been highly effective in supporting young people through their age disputes.

This is in part due to its accessibility - within a few weeks of accessing the Hub, Young Roots can link young people with sports clubs and learning activities overseen by youthworkers; practical/emotional support - which might involve registering with a GP, sourcing new clothes, securing legal representation, resolving housing issues or homelessness, or enrolling at a local college - overseen by caseworkers; and specialist psychological support from the Helen Bamber Foundation. The vast majority of young people supported by Young Roots are recently arrived asylum seekers with no family or network in the UK. Most have suffered enormous hardship on their migration journeys and many are suffering the effects of traumatic experiences including torture, trafficking, police brutality, and other forms of child abuse. Young Roots provides vital services and a sense of community, allowing a young person to feel safe, build trust with adult professionals, and establish a support network. At the weekly Hubs, young people are listened to, can share their burdens, socialise with their peers, and reduce their sense of isolation and stress.

Young peoples' engagement with casework, therapeutic support and the legal process also tends to be much more consistent because appointments are in a recognised, age-appropriate, safe, fun, and supportive environment. Most young people attend Young Roots consistently for six months+ and many young people have been accessing Young Roots' services consistently for two years or more.

A young person can come to the Hub to play football and make friends, whilst also accessing casework support, legal advice and therapeutic support at the same time. This community Hub model destigmatises mental health for young people, many of whom make each other aware that psychosocial support is helpful and encourage each other to access it.

As a result, youthworkers, caseworkers and psychologists have the opportunity to see and consider a young person's presentation in a variety of settings over an extended period. They will often have the opportunity to observe a young person playing sports or games and interacting with children and young adults of different ages.

They can observe a young person's independence and practical skills, or their required level of emotional support in more formal meetings. They can establish a comprehensive picture of their mental health symptoms, and how these interact and overlap with personality, social and emotional maturity and cognitive ability. These are factors that would be of great benefit to a professional trying to formally assess a young person's age, but are very difficult to observe/consider in the standard age-assessment process. This holistic model of support and interaction allows young people to demonstrate their age in nuanced and authentic ways. While the youthworkers, caseworkers and psychologists do not carry out any form of age assessment themselves, they are able to provide their observations of the young person's presentation with regards to their age for social workers carrying out age assessments, and to the courts if an age determination is challenged.

From January 2020 to December 2023, **44** of the age-disputed young people supported by Young Roots at their Brent Hub engaged with all three key areas of the model: youth activities, casework and psychological support.

Of these age-disputed cases, **32** (73%) were ultimately accepted to be children – either by the courts or the local authority.

Of the remaining 12 cases, **3** have ongoing age-disputes at various stages of the assessment and appeal process, and just **9** young people have been determined to be adults.

The Hub model promotes engagement, and because the environment is age-appropriate and supportive as described above, it enables young people to better demonstrate their age. This is in contrast to the current standard age assessment process which often involves long interrogative meetings held in sterile adult spaces, conducted by a panel of unknown professionals.

The Hub benefits young people and assists decision-makers by offering observations of the young person's interactions and behaviours in environments that would otherwise not be accounted for in assessments.

Case studies

A is a refugee from Afghanistan who arrived in the UK in the back of a lorry in 2019, aged 16.

He had become separated from his mother and sister in Iran and has never seen them since.

On arrival, he was taken into the care of a local authority pending the outcome of an assessment of his age. He was interviewed by social workers on five separate occasions, a process which he found extremely traumatising. He describes feeling ridiculed, disbelieved and interrogated during the assessments and this ultimately resulted in him going missing from care. Based on the social work age assessment, he was determined to be an adult of 28 years old, in his absence.

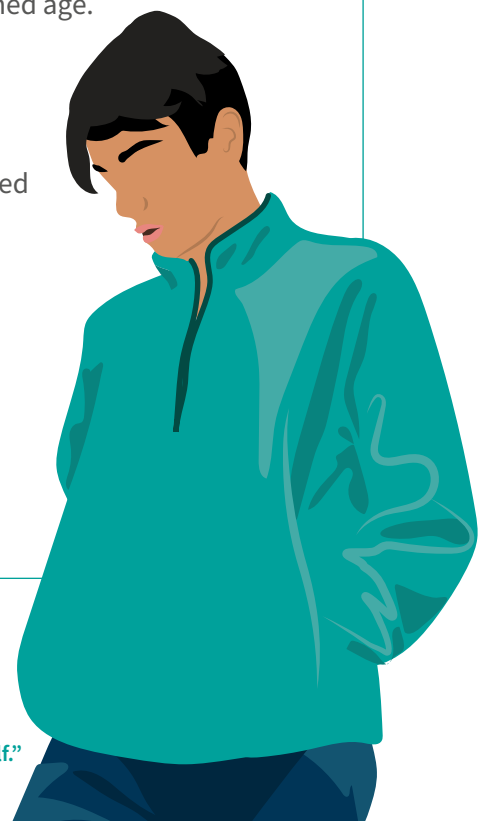
Around a year later, A was advised by a charity to attend the Young Roots Hub and to speak to a caseworker. It was evident immediately to the caseworker that A was suffering from severe mental health symptoms that caused him to feel very scared, anxious and depressed.

He described having spent the last 12 months in varying conditions of street homelessness and modern slavery. He told the caseworker that he had “problems with his age”. The caseworker immediately referred A to the psychologist from the Helen Bamber Foundation and found him reputable public law legal representation.

With the support of the caseworker, psychologist and youthworkers, A very apprehensively and gradually began to engage with youth activities, mainly football sessions. He attended more than 25 therapy sessions with the Helen Bamber Foundation over a period of 12 months.

His psychologist formulated that A was a highly vulnerable young person with pre-existing trauma and suspected autism, and that the age assessment process had triggered severe social anxiety and withdrawal. His caseworker supported him to buy clothes, access his GP, attend legal meetings, stay safe and access Home Office financial support. The caseworker and therapist provided the local authority with detailed support letters based on their observations of A's presentation in youth activities, therapy appointments and other settings, in which they felt he presented like a teenager of his claimed age.

On the basis of this evidence, A's claimed age of 16 on arrival was ultimately accepted by the local authority, more than two years after their initial assessment which determined him to be 28 years old.



E¹² was an orphan born in Eritrea who fled religious persecution with her aunt, living in Sudan as an undocumented migrant before travelling alone through Europe, and arriving in the UK by boat in June 2021 aged 17.

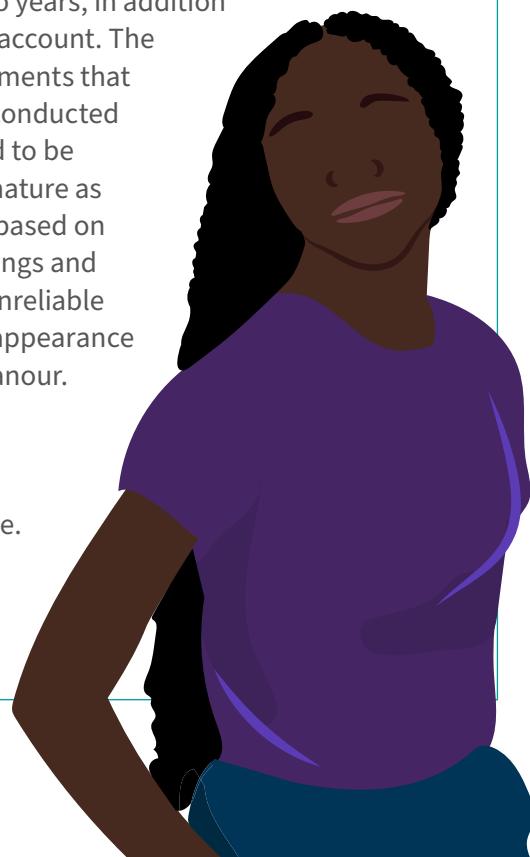
On arrival, E was ‘assessed’ to be 22 by social workers employed by the Home Office at the Kent Intake Unit (KIU) and placed in adult asylum accommodation.

She came to the attention of Young Roots, who referred her to the local authority as a child in need. Rather than taking E into care, the local authority conducted a ‘short-form’ age assessment that was completed over a single session with no appropriate adult present and no ‘minded to’ process. This concluded that E was “likely to be significantly older than 22” years old.

E challenged this age assessment, and at the fact-finding hearing in July 2023, E had four witnesses who supported her age, including professionals from Young Roots and the Helen Bamber Foundation (HBF) who had worked with E over two years. They had had the opportunity to get to know her and to observe her behaviour in settings with other young people. None of the witnesses from Young Roots or HBF had any concerns about E being obviously older than her stated age.

HBF’s clinical psychologist, Dr Argyriou, whilst acknowledging the difficulty of accurately assessing age based on psychological principles given large individual and culture differences, considered that E’s presentation during therapy (including social, emotional, cognitive, identity, and behavioural indicators observed) were consistent, from a psychological perspective, with an adolescent of E’s stated age.

The Tribunal Judge placed weight on the evidence from the professionals from Young Roots and HBF, who had worked with E for around two years, in addition to E’s own account. The age assessments that had been conducted were found to be limited in nature as they were based on brief meetings and relied on unreliable factors of appearance and demeanour. The Judge declared E to be her claimed age.



¹² R (E) v Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea (JR-2022-LON-001940) – see Doughty Street Chambers, [Young female Eritrean refugee finally vindicated in respect of her age after almost two years of litigation and having been denied statutory care](#)

K¹³ is an Iranian Kurd who arrived in the UK in the back of a lorry in November 2019 when he was just 14 years old.

Upon arrival, K presented to the Police in Leicestershire and was taken into Leicestershire local authority's care pending an assessment of his age.

K was assessed to be an adult aged 22 and was sent to adult asylum support accommodation in Brent before a safeguarding referral was raised by the British Red Cross raising concerns about K's age and vulnerability. He was also referred to Young Roots at this stage by the British Red Cross. Brent local authority did not take K into care and instead conducted a 'short-form' assessment of his age, which did not comply with principles set out in case law, before concluding that he was an adult aged 23 or 24.

K had a significant history of self-harm and hospitalisation due to mental health concerns - he had been diagnosed with PTSD, depression and found to have symptoms of emerging emotionally unstable personality disorder. However, K's 'anger issues' had been interpreted by Leicestershire as evidence that he was not a child as he claimed to be.

A legal challenge was brought and, after a four-day hearing, and after a careful analysis of the evidence, the Upper Tribunal concluded that both the Leicestershire and Brent age assessments failed to consider K's mental health and the impact upon his behaviour and presentation.

The Tribunal relied heavily upon evidence from Dr Argyriou, Senior Clinical Psychologist at the Helen Bamber Foundation in relation to K's mental health symptoms and presentation. K's disruptive behaviour, aggression and self-harm had been misread as adult behaviour when instead he presented psychologically in a manner that was "abundantly clear" to Dr Argyriou that K was a child. She found his clinical symptoms to be "very typical" of an adolescent with PTSD and emotional dysregulation. The Upper Tribunal found K to be a vulnerable child of 17 years old.

This case is a strong illustration of the value of evidence from different professionals who have worked with a child over a period of time and can bring an expert view and interpretation of their behaviour.

¹³ R (K) v London Borough of Brent [2022] JR-2021-LON-001398. See summary at Doughty Street, [Upper Tribunal finds vulnerable child to be 17 despite two flawed age assessments which led to denial of Children Act 1989 support and accommodation](#)



Conclusion and recommendations

International guidance on age assessments¹⁴ makes clear that age assessment procedures should only be undertaken as a measure of last resort when there are grounds for serious doubts about age and where other approaches have failed to establish the individual's age.

Despite this, an increasing number of children are disbelieved when they arrive in the UK, or first present to authorities. Age assessments are still happening far too frequently, resulting in children having to undergo lengthy and harmful processes that impact on their recovery, education, and protection.

¹⁴ UNHCR, Guidelines on Assessing and Determining the Best Interests of the Child, 2018; UNHCR, A Refugee and Then, Participatory Assessment of the Reception and Early Integration of Unaccompanied Refugee Children in the UK, 2019; UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, General Comment No 6. Treatment of Unaccompanied and Separated Children Outside their Country of Origin, 1 September 2005, CRC/GC/2005/6; UNHCR and UNICEF, Safe and Sound: what States can do to ensure respect for the best interests of unaccompanied and separated children in Europe, October 2014; UNHCR, Observations on the use of age assessments in the identification of separated or unaccompanied children seeking asylum – Case No. CIK-1938/2014 – Lithuanian Supreme Court. See also N.B.F. v Spain, No. 11/2017

When age assessments are required, the process should be fair, holistic, rights-respecting and, in particular, work in the best interests of children.

The evidence from the Young Roots and Helen Bamber Foundation approach in the Hub model demonstrates that:

- **holistic, long-term support for age-disputed young people often allows them to better demonstrate their age in nuanced ways**
- **independent professionals working with young people can provide good insight on a young person's presentation, and therefore their views should be considered in all appropriate cases. They are too often overlooked.**

To improve the quality and accuracy of age determinations, we recommend that all age assessments should incorporate this holistic approach. To be effective, these assessments should be conducted over an appropriate period of time, drawing on and giving appropriate weight to the expertise of those who play a role in the young person's life. This includes health professionals, psychologists, teachers, foster parents, youthworkers, advocates, guardians and social workers.

As the Home Office seeks to roll out the National Age Assessment Board, it is vital that a multi-agency approach – which makes a fair age determination of age more possible – is advocated for and retained.

It is also essential that young people's opportunities to form trusting and longer-term relationships with relevant professionals are protected. Under the 'Illegal' Migration Act, these are very much at risk, as the Act aims to swiftly remove people from the country without allowing them to claim asylum (or challenge an age assessment). This increases the danger of children being treated as adults and denied the vital support and protection they need.



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