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Broken futures: young Afghan asylum seekers in the UK and on return to their country of origin

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Introduction

In 2011, 1,277 unaccompanied minors¹ claimed asylum in the UK, 388 of whom came from Afghanistan, the country of origin for the largest number of unaccompanied asylum seeking children (UASC) (UKBA 2012d). A further 354 new arrivals were age-disputed (Refugee Council 2012), and at the end of March 2011, there were 2,680 unaccompanied minors being cared for by local authorities across England (Department of Education 2011). Some 950 initial decisions were made on asylum claims of unaccompanied minors still aged 17 or under in 2011. Of these, 165 were refused; 186 were granted refugee status; 6 were granted Humanitarian Protection; and the vast majority, 593, was granted Discretionary Leave to Remain (DLR)² (UKBA 2012e).

Under international and domestic law, the UK is prohibited from returning children to their countries of origin unless there are adequate reception facilities to return them to. The Committee on the Rights of the Child has stated that a child should not be returned to the country of origin where there is a 'reasonable' risk that return would result in a violation of the child's fundamental human rights (Committee on the Rights of the Child 2005).

In addition, the UK Border Agency instructs that "no unaccompanied child will be removed from the United Kingdom unless the Secretary of State is satisfied that safe and adequate reception arrangements are in place in the country to which the child is to be removed" (UKBA 2009). Thus, although refused refugee status or Humanitarian Protection, many unaccompanied minors are granted DLR, as a result, largely, of their status as children.

DLR lasts for three years, or until the young person is 17.5 years old, whichever is the shorter period. When their DLR expires, young people have the right to apply for an extension of their leave to remain. However, between 2005 and 2010, only 3% of such applications were successful (RCC 2011), meaning that the overwhelming majority face the possibility of detention and forced removal to their countries of origin when they reach 18 and are no longer children.

In other words, after having risked the danger of journeying to the UK, enduring the stress and anxiety of the legal asylum process and then, for many, spending their teenage years concerned about the future of their immigration status, their fragmented journeys culminate in the approach to their 18th birthday when their applications for further leave to remain are often refused, and many become Appeal Rights Exhausted (ARE).

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¹ The term 'unaccompanied minor', and the term 'unaccompanied asylum seeking child' (UASC) shall be used to refer to a person under the age of 18, who is claiming asylum in their own right, is separated from both parents, and not being cared for by an adult who by law or custom has responsibility to do so.

² DLR is a status granted in limited circumstances for individuals who have not been recognized as refugees or as qualifying for humanitarian protection, but where it is still considered that return to country of origin would be inappropriate or unsafe.

These young people find their choices are limited: return voluntarily to their country of origin with the help of an Assisted Voluntary Return (AVR) package, or reject this option and attempt to avoid enforced removal by absconding, often to a life of destitution. For many young people who take this path, the final outcome will still be detention and enforced removal.

One hundred former unaccompanied minors³ were forcibly removed from the UK in 2011 (information obtained as a result of a Freedom of Information request by Refugee Support Network), and these young people are not monitored on arrival in their country of origin. It has been deemed safe for them to return, and yet little is known about what happens to these young people once they leave the UK. In this paper, we seek to examine why young people in this position make the choices they do, the risks they then face, and, most importantly of all, what happens to those who are forcibly removed.

Special attention should be paid to the long-term life chances of young people who have spent formative years in the UK, whether or not they remain in this country. This study therefore focuses exclusively on the pre- and post-removal experiences of 18 – 24 year olds who arrived in the UK as unaccompanied asylum seeking children. We have focused on the experiences of forced returnees to Afghanistan, as this is the country to which the largest numbers of former unaccompanied minors are currently returned.

Methodology

This study is based on a combination of a review of selected available literature, and primary research with former unaccompanied minors and the professionals who have worked or work with them, both in the UK and in Afghanistan.

A total of 51 in-depth, semi-structured interviews were carried out between January 2012 and April 2012. Of these 24 were with former unaccompanied minors in the UK, the majority of whom are appeal rights exhausted and liable to be removed from the UK; 14 were with professionals working with former unaccompanied minors in the UK and 13 were with professionals based in Afghanistan (largely Kabul) who have worked with returnee children and young people. All of the young people interviewed for this research were male, and ranged in age from 17.5 to 22. The majority is from Afghanistan (18), but young people from Iran, Eritrea, Sudan and Albania were also interviewed.

Five of the interviews with young people were conducted in Dari with the help of an Afghan research assistant, who then translated her Dari transcript orally verbatim with the authors. All other interviews were conducted in English without the need for interpretation.

Professional respondents in the UK represent both the statutory and voluntary sector, and those based in Afghanistan work either for International Non-Government Organisations (INGO) or smaller, community-based charities and businesses. Interviews with professionals based in Afghanistan were conducted via skype or email. All respondents consented to take part in the process, and the purpose of the research was clearly explained to all participants.

³ The term ‘former unaccompanied minor’ and the term ‘former UASC’ shall be used to describe a young person who arrived in the UK as an unaccompanied minor (see footnote 1 for definition) and has since reached the age of 18.

In addition to these 51 interviews, the case-studies of 12 young people aged between 18 and 24 who had come to the UK as unaccompanied minors and were forcibly removed to Afghanistan were shared with us, either by young people directly, by professionals working in Afghanistan, or by professionals in the UK who, on occasion, have remained in regular contact with young people post removal.

It is of paramount importance that no harm should come to any participants as a result of this study. For this reason all quotes from former unaccompanied minors, whether in the UK or in Afghanistan, are identified by codings only. Quotes from young people are coded YP, quotes from professionals working with unaccompanied and former unaccompanied young people in the UK are coded UKP, and quotes from professionals working in Afghanistan are coded AP.

Where more detailed case-studies have been provided, the names used are pseudonyms. 'Harm' also includes feelings of discomfort, which may be caused as some questions may lead former unaccompanied minors to reflect on difficult experiences or circumstances. In order to minimise such discomfort, young people were reminded that they could stop the interview at any time, and were not obliged to answer any question they did not wish to. Efforts to create a young person-friendly environment and to conduct interviews in locations the young people were both familiar and comfortable with were also undertaken at all times.

Justification of 'youth' as a special category

As noted above, this report is based in the belief that former unaccompanied minors, although no longer children, constitute a special group with particular needs and deserving of tailored support. This first section seeks to highlight that though the UK immigration system sees 18 years as the age at which a person goes from being a child to fully adult, there is ample evidence to suggest that such a clear cut dichotomy is in practice both unrealistic and unhelpful. Adults and children are treated very differently within the asylum system, and UKBA does not recognize care-leavers as a special group with additional support needs – they are simply children in care when they are 17 years old, and adults subject to immigration control when they are 18 years old.

This dichotomy allows unaccompanied young asylum seekers who have been children in care in the UK to be forcibly removed to their country of origin as adults and without support when they turn 18. This report begins by examining the impact of some of the specific difficulties unaccompanied asylum seeking children who have been awarded DLR face as they approach 18. It is the authors' experience that these difficulties can further impede transition into adulthood, leaving these young people particularly vulnerable if they become ARE and face life either as an absconder in the UK or a returnee in their country of origin.

Cognitive and emotional development

Research carried out on the development of the brain from birth to childhood challenges long-held assumptions about the timing of brain maturation culminating at 18 years, and reveals that the brain does not look like that of an adult until a person's early twenties (National Institute of Mental Health, 2011). Evidence suggests that the development of certain areas of the brain continues past the age of 18 and into early adulthood. Such changes include "changes in the frontal lobe, hippocampus and amygdale... (which) are the most profound and are most likely to account for teenage behaviour, mood and cognition"

(Edwards 2009: 432). In addition, the process of cognitive and emotional integration is also found to take place only in early adulthood, as opposed to adolescence. This development enables one to control impulses, gives the ability to regulate and interpret emotions and allows for emotional processing (Johnson et al. 2009).

Though maturity ranges considerably between individuals throughout young adulthood (between 18 and 25 years), psychosocial studies demonstrate that those at the lower end of this age range are closer in their psychosocial functioning to those under 18 than they are to those who are 25 years old (Prior et al. 2011). Maturity in this respect can also be measured in terms of the individuals' status in relation to certain social factors such as employment, residential environment and social and interpersonal networks (ibid).

With regards to such measurements, most unaccompanied minors have not had a chance to fully settle in their country of origin. It is possible that such major changes and transitions within their social and cultural contexts may have a significant effect on their ability to mature and transition to adulthood as smoothly as young people who have consistency in terms of social networks.

Interviews with UK practitioners who work regularly with unaccompanied minors reinforced the view that these young people are in no way suddenly able to cope with the pressure of their legal immigration case and the many other changes they face as they reach 18, in the way that the current immigration system expects them to.

All of the practitioners interviewed expressed concerns about young people in this position, stating that "I don't think it's this magic thing where they turn 18 and suddenly they know everything" (UK Professional 4) and that "they aren't able to have the comfort of having a bridge into adulthood like most young people do" (UKP3). Several practitioners had experienced unaccompanied minors becoming more vulnerable at 18, due to the large number of changes and uncertainty they face as they approach majority, meaning that rather than becoming more able to cope with changes and transition, many became less able to do so.

In addition to the cognitive and emotional growth and change which take place in one's late teens to early twenties, unaccompanied minors in the UK face a unique set of difficulties which make the transition to young adulthood a particularly challenging time for them.

Mental health implications of the uncertainty associated with DLR

"Now I'm stuck in the middle, I cannot move forward, I cannot move backward, I cannot go anywhere. It's very hard to explain, I just don't know what to do. I'm alive but I'm dead. I don't know. I think it's too much for me, sometimes, I just, I wish that I wasn't even born. I regret it, honesty, I'll be honest with you, it's not nice to say but I really, really regret my living." (YP 10)

Practitioners in the UK and unaccompanied minors themselves have made it clear that the short-term nature of DLR is very difficult for young people to live with. This difficulty seems to be mainly due to the consequent uncertainty about their future, and the inability for young people to make concrete plans (Kohli 2007). This uncertainty can be long lasting, stretching from the time they arrive in the host country until they reach majority, and has a significant impact on their ability to prepare for the future, whether that be in the UK or their country of origin. UK practitioners interviewed repeatedly expressed concern over the effect that this

short-term status has on young people's mental health. One explained that "the procedure as it exists today creates limbo for young people and they remain in uncertainty during a crucial period of adolescence, which probably has long term negative consequences on their emotional and psychological well-being, whether they stay here or go back to their country" (UKP2).

This uncertainty particularly affects unaccompanied minors ability to make long-term plans for their education, training and relationships. Young people interviewed repeatedly expressed how difficult it is to make plans for their lives when they do not know how much longer they will be able to stay in the UK.

Though it is common for unaccompanied minors to be very enthusiastic about their studies and to have high ambitions and hopes for their own futures, uncertainty surrounding their status prevents many of them from progressing in education for both psychological and practical reasons. A study carried out by Jan-Paul Brekke (2004) amongst unaccompanied asylum seeking children in Sweden awaiting a final decision on their immigration status revealed that the waiting was so torturous for many of them that they could not actively engage with their future at all.

Age-related disadvantage within the asylum process

In the first quarter of 2011, out of all asylum claims made in the UK, 21% of all initial adult asylum decisions resulted in the granting of refugee status, whilst only 11% of applications made by unaccompanied minors were granted refugee status in the first instance (Home Office 2011). This may, in part, be attributable to their lack of understanding of the meanings of various forms of status, or because they are grateful to receive even a temporary form of status and therefore do not question whether they should have been granted something else. One UK practitioner expressed concern over this, saying;

A lot of people don't pursue their actual asylum claim or their appeal rights because they have got DLR and solicitors advise them against it until they turn 18, which I don't think is necessarily the best thing. If they have a genuine asylum claim they should probably push it (UKP4).

It has also been suggested that many unaccompanied minors have been granted DLR because the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees is not being interpreted in an appropriate child-specific manner when assessing the claims of minors (Bhabha 2001; Bhabha & Finch 1999). UNHCR's Quality Initiative Project Report (2009) reported that of the 100 asylum decisions of unaccompanied minors examined, one in five case owners did not recognise or analyse child specific forms of persecution where evident.

'Young adults' as a special category in other sectors

Whilst it would be unfounded to claim that all vulnerable young people in the UK enjoy full support during their transition to adulthood, there are a number of policies and targeted services which do seek to support young adults through this transition, recognising that vulnerable young adults can be in need of just as much support as younger teenagers.

One of the best examples of this kind of extended support to young adults is leaving care support. The Department of Health released research findings in 1999 which revealed that whilst care leavers had to move into independent living at the age of 16 or 17, the average age for leaving home for young people in the population as a whole was 22 (Department of Health 1999). It was concluded that not only were care leavers often disadvantaged by a lack of family support, but they were also expected to become independent adults at an unreasonably young and uniform age – much younger than their peers who had parental support.

In response, the government introduced the Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000 which provided extended support for young adults who had been in care. The act requires local authorities to provide them with a personal advisor, a pathway plan, and assistance with employment, training, education and vacation accommodation for those in higher education if needed. This support extends until a young person's 21st birthday or up to their 24th birthday if they are in full time education or training (Department of Health 2000). Unaccompanied minors who turn 18 may also benefit from leaving care support if they receive settled immigration status, or if their asylum claim, appeal or application for an extension of DLR is still pending.

There has also been substantial pressure in recent years to change the criminal justice system to recognise young adults as a particular group in need of continued support, as has happened for care leavers. There have been considerable improvements as policy makers have concluded that young adult offenders tend to re-offend when they lose the support they had as minors. In recognition of the evident needs of young adults within the criminal justice system, 18 to 21 year olds in England and Wales are no longer detained with adults, but rather are placed in differentiated Young Offenders Institutions (Prior et al. 2011).

Within this field, there is also international recognition that young adults should not be treated as full adults and require special treatment. The UN Standard Minimum Rules for the Administration of Juvenile Justice (The Beijing Rules) calls that within member states “every effort should be made to extend the principles embodied in the Rules to young adult offenders”. The Council of Europe also recognises the needs of this vulnerable group, stating that “reflecting the extended transition to adulthood, it should be possible for young adults under the age of 21 to be treated in a way comparable to juveniles and be subject to the same interventions” (Rule II of Recommendations 2003: 20 of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe on ‘The Role of Juvenile Justice’).

Lastly, New Deal for Young People (NDYP) was started in 1998 and is the largest labour market programme in Britain, providing support to 18 to 24 year olds who have been unemployed for six months or more. The aim of the programme is to help young adults find lasting employment and to increase their long term employability.

Young people in the programme go through an intensive support process to find a job. If they do not find employment straight away, they are directed towards one of the four New Deal Options: subsidised work, full time education or training, work in the voluntary sector or work with the environment task force (White & Riley, 2002)

At an international level, the United Nations defines youth as persons between the ages of 15 and 24 years, and calls for the development of youth policies which address the needs of groups of young people who are particularly vulnerable as a result of their current circumstances, political conditions, or long histories of social exclusion or discrimination. It

seems clear to us that former unaccompanied minors constitute one of these groups (UNDESA 2012).

Local authority support

Currently, unaccompanied minors in the UK, regardless of their status, are cared for by social services under the 1989 Children's Act in the same way in which UK children would be. This means that they are provided with education and housing, as well the support of a social worker and key worker. Whilst such care and provision for unaccompanied minors is positive, support for unaccompanied minors becomes more complicated as soon as they reach 18 and become ARE.

The 20120 *R(SO) v Barking & Dagenham LBC [2010] EWCA Civ 1101* judgment made clear that, like citizen children, unaccompanied minors who have been in the care of social services for 13 weeks or more are entitled to leaving care support under Section 23C of the 1989 Children's Act. However, Schedule 3 of the Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act 2002 excludes *failed asylum seekers* from Section 23C of the Children's Act, unless withdrawal of such support would cause a breach of that person's rights under the European Convention on Human Rights.

In other words, whilst unaccompanied minors are entitled to leaving care support under the Children's Act, the Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act 2002 allows local authorities to exclude these young people from leaving care support if they have exhausted all of their appeal rights. The only way local authorities can continue their support of unaccompanied minors in this position, is if they can prove that to discontinue support would breach their Convention rights.

This means that it is up to each social worker dealing with an ARE former unaccompanied minor to determine whether the withdrawal of leaving care support would constitute a breach of a young person's Convention rights or not. The interpretation of this legislation and consequent practice seems to vary, not only across regions of the UK, but also from local authority to local authority within London.

The UK practitioners interviewed confirmed this lack of coordinated interpretation and practice by social services. One commented that "some social services will see what they can get away with and cut off support completely as soon as they turn 18, whilst others will put them on Leaving Care provisions" (UKP4). Another noted that "it is very varied, depending on the borough, and depending on the social worker. It *can* work in peoples' favour that there is discretion, but obviously not always" (UKP5).

Practitioners noted that there is no common approach to human rights assessments, and therefore defining whether or not the withdrawal of support would constitute a breach of a person's Convention rights is problematic. Many local authorities and trainee social workers do not receive in-depth asylum-specific training, exacerbating the problem further. One practitioner explained:

The law allows for the practice to be varied. People are not clear on it – you have the final hurdle of doing a human rights assessment before you withdraw support, but lots of local authorities aren't clear on what that has to involve. It's only very recently that there has been any guidance on this

produced. Obviously, that can then be challenged legally, but across the UK I am not sure how much that is being done, or how equipped our social workers really are (UKP14).

Cutting off leaving care support for appeal rights exhausted young people

A number of practitioners interviewed believed that some local authorities were deliberately withdrawing support from appeal rights exhausted young people, both as a result of diminishing budgets, and as a way of discouraging them from extending their time in the UK, in the hope that the lack of support would encourage them to return to their countries of origin.

In the light of shrinking budgets, this deliberate cut-off may also be due the fact that if a young person has exhausted all their appeal rights, UKBA funding for their support will cease 3 months after their 18th birthday. It is not surprising therefore, that local authorities are often unwilling to interpret Schedule 3 of the Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act 2002 in a generous manner, as they will have to fund leaving care support for appeal rights exhausted young people themselves. A UK practitioner explained that “UKBA take the view that if you cut support, people will be more likely to leave the UK” (UKP14).

Increased vulnerability due to a cut in support

Many former unaccompanied minors who are ARE thus find themselves without support after they have reached 18. Many of the UK professionals interviewed had found that turning 18 leaves these young people more vulnerable and at risk than they were when they arrived as unaccompanied minors, telling that “structures available for under 18s are quite substantial in terms of finance, care and education, and it all evaporates when they turn 18” (UKP2). Another confirmed that “on the whole our experience is that they actually become more vulnerable because their support is cut off” (UKP3).

Referring to the cut in social services’ support, this young person illustrates the consequences that this sudden change had on a friend of his, who arrived in the UK as an unaccompanied minor;

This ruined one of my friend’s lives. He just wasn’t ready to handle so much independence, and he didn’t keep his place in college, and it all got worse for him. He didn’t have status and he didn’t know what to do... We still need some support – just turning 18 does not suddenly make you mature and capable” (YP2).

Other young people interviewed agreed that cuts in support had left them more vulnerable, with one telling that “I am staying with my friend and sleeping on his sofa because social services say that I can’t stay in my house because my case failed and they say I’m an adult now” (YP5). The withdrawal of support meant that many also had to drop out of their college courses. This young person describes how having to leave college left him with nothing to do during the day, which in turn had negative consequences on his mental health;

When you have to leave college you have nothing to do. It’s very disappointing that you go to college for one year and then have to stop. It’s best if you can stay, especially if your claim has failed,

because it helps with the stress and people lose control if they have too much stress (YP5).

It seems clear that the combination of these mental health factors associated with their position within the UK asylum system and the cuts young people experience in local authority care leave those who become ARE ill-equipped to deal with the decisions they must now face.

Eighteen and ARE: options for former unaccompanied minors

Former unaccompanied minors who have turned 18 and are unable to take their asylum case, or a fresh claim, any further tend to take one of three paths; voluntary return to their country of origin, absconding from the asylum system and ‘disappearing’, or, finally, being forced to return to their country of origin. Having concluded that examined the situation of unaccompanied minors as they approach 18, and the multiple disadvantages they face as they move into young adulthood, leave them in a highly vulnerable position, we now examine each of the three options that they face.

Voluntary return

Money doesn’t change anything... the situation in my country is still the same, the situation in my family is still the same. How does some money make this OK? (YP2)

The term Assisted Voluntary Return (AVR) refers to a range of UKBA funded programmes that are available to people who are in the UK asylum system and wish to return home voluntarily. There are three general AVR programmes: the voluntary assisted return and reintegration programme (VARRP); assisted voluntary return for irregular migrants (AVRIM); and assisted voluntary return for families and children (AVRFC). These programmes are run by Refugee Action, a UK charity independent from UKBA. Refugee Action aim to provide a “confidential, impartial and non-directive” service that helps people to decide whether or not they wish to return voluntarily to their country of origin (Refugee Action, 2012a).

The AVR programme relevant to this report is the VARRP scheme, as young people who have arrived in the UK as UASC and since turned 18 are considered adults and thus catered for through this scheme⁴. Individuals returning to their country of origin through this programme are eligible for up to £1,500 worth of reintegration assistance, including a £500 relocation grant, paid in cash on departure from the UK (UKBA 2011). They also receive practical pre-departure support⁵, and assistance upon return⁶.

⁴ Unaccompanied minors (those still under 18) return under the AVRFC programme, unless they are age-disputed and believed to be 18+, in which case they also return under the VARRP programme. Refugee Action records show that 13 UASC returned home under the AVRFC or VARRP programme last year (Refugee Action, 2012b).

⁵ Refugee Action will help the individual obtain travel documents, book and pay for flights, arrange transport to the UK departure airport if needed, and give assistance at the departure airport.

⁶ Refugee Action will arrange onward transport when back in country, if needed, and individuals can contact Refugee Action, or their implementing partner within one month of return to access the remainder of their reintegration assistance.

Although former unaccompanied minors can apply for AVR at any point in the asylum process, including whilst detained in an Immigration Removal Centre (IRC), they will become ineligible for AVR as soon as they have removal directions issued, even if these are subsequently cancelled (UKBA 2011). Several of the young people interviewed for this study have had multiple removal directions issued, cancelled and reissued, and thus find themselves ineligible for VARRP should they wish to take it.

Uptake of VARRP amongst former unaccompanied minors is low. Refugee Action report that 107 individuals who were under 18 when they entered the UK left through the VARRP scheme as adults between 1st April 2011 and 10th April 2012 (Refugee Action 2012b). It remains unclear however, how many of these former UASC left the UK when still aged between 18 – 24, and how many were over this age by the time they decided to take AVR.

The precise number of former unaccompanied minors aged 18 – 24 who opt to take AVR is thus likely to be lower. Of the 14 UK professionals interviewed, who between them have worked with over 2000 UASC and former UASC, two had each known one former UASC who chose to take AVR. None of the 24 former UASC interviewed were willing to consider taking AVR, and only one had known an Iraqi friend take it, telling that “he had some bad problems with his head, and so he just thought he should go home. But he didn’t understand what he was doing. He called me from Iraq saying ‘what have I done, I need to come back to the UK’, but he can’t now” (YP5).

The majority of young people reacted vehemently against the idea of returning voluntarily to their own country, making comments such as “No one can go back! No-one wants to go back!”(YP7), “I have never seen someone to say ‘I want to go back to Afghanistan’. No one would choose to go home, no one wants to go” (YP10), and “I will kill myself before I take this money” (YP2).

The explanation for this adverse reaction to voluntary return appears to be five-fold. Former UASC genuinely fear life in Afghanistan, have become accustomed to life and the opportunities in the UK, have a strong sense of shame around the concept of returning voluntarily, are optimistic their situation might change, and finally, receive varying levels of information about AVR.

Every one of the young people interviewed said they would be too scared of returning to Afghanistan to consider AVR. Their fears were both specific fears, and a general fear of the unknown. Fear of being a victim of targeted or generalized violence dominated the responses, with 14 young people using phrases such as ‘not safe’, ‘too dangerous’, ‘kill me’, ‘bombs’, ‘Taliban’ and ‘guns’ and ‘serious problems’ in their answers. One young person expressed the view that anyone taking AVR “is making a fatalistic decision. He must want to die” (YP16).

Other young people were afraid of the unknown, with 8 interviewees saying they would find themselves in an unfamiliar city. One young person went so far as to say that when returned they “don’t know nothing at all” (YP4). The UK professionals interviewed confirmed that fear was the principal reason young people refuse AVR, with one saying that “the quality of decision making in asylum cases is not flawless. Just because a young person has not been able to evidence their fear sufficiently, this in no way means that that the threat against them was not real or no longer exists” (UKP15).

The boys interviewed were adamant that the financial gain associated with AVR was not significant for them, and did little to allay their fears. One boy stated “I can’t go back to my country – I don’t know why no-one understands this, some money does not change the situation there” (YP5), and another “they said they would give me £1500, but I don’t want their money. I came to this country to save my life, why would I want money to go back? I don’t want people to think I just came here for the money”(YP11). Other young people stressed that the amount offered would “soon be finished” (YP16) or “quickly run out” (YP20).

These fears of being left vulnerable without financial resources are exacerbated by rumours of young people who took voluntary return to Afghanistan but were not able to access the promised grant on arrival in Kabul, or who had to leave a proportion of it with the issuing officer as a bribe.

The young people’s fear also appeared to be connected to being thrust into an unfamiliar environment. Some 11 of the Afghan young people interviewed had left Kabul over five years ago, before the age of 14, and one UK professional told of a boy she was working with who was offered voluntary return to Afghanistan, but who had left there with his family for Pakistan’s refugee camps when he was two years old, and had no memory of Afghanistan. However, in many cases even the offer of return to a third country creates fear. An Eritrean boy interviewed was told he could take AVR to a list of alternative countries, and said “I don’t know why I would want to go to another country that I don’t know” (YP19).

The young people interviewed were also convinced that they had no future in their country of origin. Most had spent between seven and two years in the UK, and all of them spoke about the networks and opportunities they had found, and how, alongside being afraid of returning, they had become accustomed to the culture and life in the UK. One young person explained that “a boy from my country will never go back voluntarily. There is no chance for study there, no college like here – because of that I don’t want to go” (YP15), and another that “I have a life here now... I don’t have a life there” (YP1). Another boy confirmed that;

Even if the Home Office gives a negative final decision, they are not willing to return voluntarily to Afghanistan. Everyone knows about the negative situation in my country. We came to this country with lots of hopes that we could study here and this is the best country to learn in. Whenever someone gets a final negative decision he just thinks ‘how could I return to my country? In my country the situation is too bad. Every boy who has lived here for one, two or three years knows everything about this country. We are so happy because we are studying and there is lots of opportunity. But if the government wants to send us back, we think ‘what can we do there?’ (YP16).

A quarter of the young people interviewed juxtaposed this lack of positive opportunity with a wealth of negative opportunity, with one boy summarizing that “all these boys who go back, they have no opportunity for good things – but for bad things there are lots of opportunities for us, with guns and bombs... this is what we wanted to get away from” (YP13). The UK professionals interviewed also felt that “they have become part of living here” (UKP1) that “they have adjusted to life in the UK... and they know that if they are returned a lot what they have here, the support network that exists, employment and especially education, they will not have there” (UKP5). Another reported that the young people she worked with felt

“that they are culturally irrelevant... they know that they have become accustomed to a western way of living, so will find it hard when they go back – it’s not surprising they don’t volunteer” (UKP12)

Over half of the young people interviewed made comments indicating that for many the issue of voluntary return is linked to shame and honour. One boy told that “it is not good luck for a young boy to volunteer – everyone will think he might be cursed and he will feel too much shame” (YP13). Professionals told that taking AVR “has become an unacceptable thing to do” (UKP2), and that “for most of the ones that I have talked to it’s almost a principled thing that they say I am an asylum seeker, I believe I had a right to make the journey I took – it’s a thing of honour...I don’t think that they necessarily expect a last minute reprieve, although some of them might, I think it’s just that on principle they don’t want to take it” (UKP13).

Shame and honour are present in the young people’s relationships with their families and wider network of relatives; in many cases families will have sold valuable land or gone into large amounts of debt in order to finance their child’s journey to the UK, with the expectation that the child will send remittances home upon arrival. In this context, young people reported feeling that returning voluntarily would bring shame upon them.

A professional who had worked with unaccompanied minors in Greece as well as in the UK told of Afghan children and young people living under a railway bridge, trying to get on boats to Italy to continue their journeys. She explained that “these were not wild kids, they were decent kids who were in despair” (UKP2). The concepts of honour and shame were powerful forces for these young people;

some of [whom] were clearly very nostalgic about their families and home and desperate about their current predicament, but felt under terrible pressure to continue against all odds, because that’s what their family wanted. There was a real sense of honour and filial obligation – and a terrible sense of failure if they were to say I can’t do it, I can’t stand it anymore. Some of the adult men were discussing more openly – I’m going home, I’ve had enough: but the children don’t have the freedom to make that decision for themselves (UKP2).

That this sense of honour, obligation and shame persists on arrival to the UK seems clear.

Other professionals, however, had experienced multiple young people refusing AVR because they “hope against hope that they won’t have to go back” (UKP1). This is particularly because as the backlog of legacy cases has been cleared⁷, increased numbers of former unaccompanied minors, now in their early twenties, have been receiving ILR outside of the normal immigration rules, usually in recognition of the inordinately long period of time they were forced to wait to receive a final decision on their case.

None of the young people interviewed for this report understood that the outcomes were likely to be very different for those whose cases have been processed under the NAM since

⁷ When the New Asylum Model was introduced in 2007, asylum applications made before 2007 but not yet resolved were placed in UKBA’s Case Resolution Directorate. Many unaccompanied minors who had applied for extensions to their DLR fell into this category, and received letters informing them that their case would be resolved within five years. This backlog is gradually being cleared by UKBA.

2007⁸. Most young people were able to tell a story of a friend or friend of a friend who had received a final negative decision, but whose situation somehow changed, resulting in a grant of ILR or RS: they hoped that they too would yet have such an experience.

One professional believed that more young people would take AVR “if they were given an honest assessment of what life will be like for them here with no status”, and that it would be “better for them to go back like this than forcibly after six months in a detention centre” (UKP6). Another professional stated that the entire support and advisory structure surrounding a young person “is so anti-return that it would take quite a brave young person to actually make a decision to volunteer – which is a disservice to a young person who might be able to return under relatively reasonable circumstances with support and funds” (UKP2).

The same professional felt that the way in which practitioners in the UK spoke about the young people’s countries of origin exacerbated their fears, even if the professionals concerned actually had very little real knowledge of their home countries. A few practitioners confirmed this view, by stating that they would never encourage a young person to return to such dangerous places, whereas others had attempted to explain this option, but found that the young person became too distressed to continue with the conversation. Only one young person interviewed had never heard of voluntary return – all of the others were familiar with the programme, albeit to varying degrees.

Finally, several young people stated that they were not inherently against the idea of returning to their country of origin, but that it was their fear of what life there would entail, and the risks they would face that held them back. Three young people explained that they would be keen to go back were it not for their fears of violence or their “problems”, with one telling us;

I have heard of this [AVR], but I don’t know anyone who took it. They have problems, the same as me. If they don’t, of course they would go. Especially me, if I didn’t have problems I would go myself, without the money! I would go back to Afghanistan. I’m not crazy, to stay here for four years without seeing my family. But people come here because they have problems (YP16).

A professional told how young people she worked with talked lovingly of their own countries, describing their beauty and how much they miss them. She explained that they dreamed of return one day, whilst still believing they would be at risk were they to return now. Another professional who has worked with over two hundred UASC and former UASC told that she also believed that;

If the young people could go back safely, they would. They don’t actually want to be here. All they want is to live with their families in the place that they are from – that is the main sense I get from them. They don’t want to live here on their own, with all the things they go through here alone, without their family. I don’t think it is a choice for them... yet they are genuinely terrified at the idea of return (UKP9).

For those who reject AVR, and are no longer supported by the Local Authority, life in the UK is bleak, and many young people ‘disappear’ or ‘go underground’, beginning a life living hand-to-mouth, attempting to avoid forced removal.

⁸ Under the NAM, UKBA aim to process cases within six months.

Absconding and destitution

The ones like this, their problems are more than the hairs on their head... the one who has to hide himself it is like he is a criminal because he is afraid of his own shadow (YP16)

It is difficult to establish clear numbers of young people who have absconded and risk destitution because of a fear that remaining in contact with authorities will lead to forcible removal from the UK. Damian Green MP, Minister for Immigration in the UK Coalition Government has stated that 24,738 failed asylum seekers whose cases were processed under the NAM remained in the UK subject to removal action at August 2011 (Hansard 2012).

However, it has been estimated that there are up to 500,000 refused asylum seekers in the UK (Gordon et al, 2009 in British Red Cross 2011). There exists, nonetheless, “very little data specific to children and young people” (Children’s Society, 2012) and it is not known precisely how many of these individuals are aged between 18 and 24.

Data provided to the Children’s Society by the Department of Education confirmed that 17% of the more than 2000 UASC who leave care each year receive no formal support, and that 51% cease to be looked-after for ‘other reasons’ (Children’s Society 2012). It is likely that being excluded from support as a result of a failed claim for asylum is one of these ‘other reasons’, yet we are also aware of young people whose social workers have made clear that they are willing to continue to support them, but who abscond nonetheless, due to fear of removal.

For the purposes of this report, we use the term ‘absconded’ to describe young people who have received final negative decisions from the Home Office, who have cut off support with their social workers or leaving care personal advisors and are not complying with reporting instructions.⁹ The term ‘disappeared’ is also used informally by social workers and practitioners in the UK to describe young people in this situation.

For these young people, without support and unable to work, destitution is often the outcome. The British Red Cross defines someone who is destitute as;

A person who is not accessing public funds, is living in extreme poverty and is unable to meet basic needs, e.g. income, food, shelter, healthcare, and who is forced to rely on irregular support from family, friends, charities or illegal working to survive (British Red Cross 2010:7)

The challenges of monitoring the situation of young people in this situation is clearly compounded by their fear of engaging with authorities and many services, as they often cut contact with the professionals who have previously supported them. For those whose cases have been closed by the Local Authority, it can be even harder – as one practitioner told us, “I wouldn’t know if they have disappeared, because we just have to move on to the next case and don’t really keep contact. You don’t have the time, or remit, to continue supporting. It’s not an ongoing support role” (UKP14). Practitioners from the voluntary sector were more

⁹ When an asylum seeker exhausts all appeal rights, they will be required to report regularly to a local police station or immigration centre to sign in, as a demonstration that they are continuing to comply with the system. Failure to report (FTR) is the term used when a person fails to attend a pre-set reporting event which they are required to attend (UKBA, 2012).

likely to have kept in touch informally with young people, and nine of those interviewed have shared stories of multiple young people they have or had retained contact with, who have been ‘disappeared’ for between one month and five years.

Of the 23 young people interviewed for this report, there was a clear divide between those who had ‘disappeared’, or who knew friends who had done so, and those who claimed this did not happen, or that it did, but was not a path they would ever take. Some seven young people self-identified themselves as ‘disappeared’, and a further eleven had friends or acquaintances who had done so.

These young people had been living in this situation for between two months and three years. The remaining five, however, were adamant that they had no friends in this position, with one stating categorically that “I never heard that an Afghan boy hid himself from the police” (YP16).

The reasons why young people in this position disappear are two-fold. Young people who had themselves ‘disappeared’, or who had friends who had done so, stated that their two key reasons for taking this path were fear of forced removal, and hope that somehow they would be granted status in the future.

Fear of forced removal was by far the most common factor informing young people’s decisions to ‘disappear’. Every young person interviewed, except for those who stated that young people did not disappear, listed fear as the primary reason for going underground, with numerous young people telling us “we are scared, that’s why we run away” (YP7), and “we have problems, or personal problems like personal enemies... so hiding myself is the only way not to go back to my country” (YP12). Another young person explained that;

If these boys hide themselves from the police and the Home Office, he can just survive in this country... in this country there is no war or fighting like in Afghanistan. There are no guns, or bomb blasts... the boys who want to hide just want to survive and escape from that (YP16).

One boy who was complying with his reporting instructions empathized with those who had failed to report, saying “it means they have a lot of problems. Because of that they will disappear themselves. They don’t want to go back to Afghanistan. Even now I am afraid every time I go to sign” (YP14).

The practitioners who had remained in touch with young people who had disappeared confirmed that fear, or panic, appeared to be the principal cause of disappearance. One professional had found that “the whole way in which their cases are dealt with from when they arrive promotes de-linking with family networks back home – the system promotes alienation from the home community rather than promoting connections – so they disappear because they are terrified at the thought of going home” (UKP2).

Practitioners had also observed patterns in young people disappearing, finding that when one young person in a group was detained and removed, others would promptly disappear. The leaking of information from UKBA to the Guardian newspaper about the potential return of minors to Afghanistan (Travis, 2010) also caused widespread panic, with several practitioners noticing increased disappearances of Afghan boys around this time.

Young people's responses also indicated that a misunderstanding of the UK asylum system may be a factor in their disappearances. Several young people indicated that they hoped that if they managed to avoid detection for long enough, at some point there might be an amnesty or they may be awarded some form of status.

A professional confirmed that they "want to stay, and they think they can do it by just staying here unofficially, and that then they will be granted status just because they have been here for a long time – they misunderstand the process" (UKP6). Other young people had seen friends get status after years of waiting, and assumed that the same thing would happen to them. One practitioner told us of a young person who ran away from Oxford and was

Living in a house in a big city up North, where he is staying with a lot of immigrants – he sounded quite hopeful because he knew some people who had got status, but it seems to me that they were legacy cases, and I don't think he realizes his case is different (UKP12).

Not all young people chose the path of disappearance. For those young people who had chosen not to disappear, despite having exhausted all their appeal rights, there were two key explanations they gave for their decision to remain engaged with the system. The first was an unwavering belief in their case, and the consequent conviction that the UK government would therefore not send them home. One young person told us;

People tell me I should leave my house, leave this city, so they don't find me. But how long would I do like this? I come to this country to save my life, I'm not going to do it like this... I can't do it like this, I can't. I will never do it. Everyone has my address and telephone – the college, my social worker. I just want to try my best with my case and I believe they will change their mind (YP11).

Another boy explained that "I'm also going to sign now, and I can't break the rules – whenever they tell me I should sign, I go, but every time I am afraid. But I respect the law and I can't break it, I cannot" (YP14). Another told that "when we are refused we don't run away. We just stay and apply to the courts" (YP7). Several young people erroneously linked good behaviour and complying with reporting instructions with the chance of ultimately obtaining a positive decision, and demonstrated confusion at the times they had not seen this happen.

One boy told us how he could not understand why his friend was detained even though "he showed the Home Office that he wasn't hiding himself and that he was signing", continuing that "he was a good student in the college and he did voluntary work... he never hid himself" (YP16). Another expressed confusion that his good behaviour had not earned him further leave to remain, while a boy with a criminal record had got Refugee Status, saying "I think I just have bad luck – one guy I know he never went to college and he stole a car and they still gave him five years – I am a good person but they don't want me here" (YP11).

Other young people had not disappeared simply because they had nowhere to run to, and understood how difficult life was for those who went underground. An Afghan boy asked "if you want to hide yourself, where can you hide yourself?" He continued "there is no place to hide -whenever the police stop you and ask about your details they know that you have nothing" (YP14). Another added "I'm not going to run away, I'm going to apply to the court. If you run away, what do you get? Nothing!" (YP7). These young people were no less

reluctant to return to their country of origin, but had discounted disappearance as a way of avoiding removal, with one explaining;

I never can think of hiding myself from the police, but I can't think that I will go back to my country either. But I can't live like these boys who are living just hiding in small rooms. If the government wants to send me back I will request them that they solve my problem, because the life will be so difficult for me there (YP12).

Many of the young people who had taken this stance told us that it was as a result of seeing the extreme risks that those who do disappear are exposed to.

The obvious and fundamental risk for young people who are cut off or who cut themselves off from their support networks and disappear is destitution and poverty. All of the young people who had disappeared spoke of acute poverty, and becoming dependent on the kindness of friends, strangers, churches or mosques for survival. Some 28% of destitute asylum seekers who had come into contact with the services of the British Red Cross reported sleeping rough at stages of their destitution, and 87% survived on only one meal a day, with many going for whole days without food (British Red Cross 2011). One young person interviewed for this report told us he and his friends faced

different kinds of problems, like not having enough food, not having money for rent of a room, and not having money for any clothes... Maybe we don't even have money for a pair of shoes – I know that life is so bad and difficult when young people do this. Even we can't get our hair cut (YP14).

Several professionals pointed out that poverty and homelessness lead on to a range of additional risks, including various forms of exploitation, development of risky or illegal survival strategies, health problems and severe psychological difficulties.

With regard to exploitation, young people and professionals provided numerous examples of labour exploitation, sexual exploitation, and exploitation of young people's inability to report crime to the police. Young people told us that they are forced to seek informal labour in order to survive. Such work is often exploitative in nature, and yet the young people interviewed felt this was something their circumstances obliged them to accept. One boy telling explained;

Informal jobs just abuse you – I worked twelve hours for £30 – when they know you have no papers they treat you like an animal and say 'you are a problem because they will fine me'. But what can I do - they only employ us because they know they can pay us less (YP3).

Another boy interviewed worked in a factory where he had sustained several injuries due to using unsafe machinery without adequate protective clothing, and another boy had worked for £1.50 per hour for 14 hours with no break. A professional told of a boy who was working long night shifts for £2 per hour in a kebab shop, and another told of young people being allowed to sleep above local shops in return for working long hours for no pay.

Transactional sex was also used by young people, in exchange for food or a place to stay. One professional made it clear that she had experienced this with young males as well as females,

and several professionals told of instances of young people becoming engaged in commercial as well as transactional sex. Research (Children's Society 2012, Crawley et al 2011, Malfait et al 2005) has also revealed further instances of refused asylum seekers being exploited through abusive or forced commercial sex work.

Compounding all these forms of exploitation is the fact that young people feel unable to approach the police for help, rendering them powerless in the face of abuse, exploitation, harm or crime. A number of young people related incidents where they would normally have gone to the police for help, but had felt unable to do so due to their immigration status. These incidents included theft of their personal possessions, physical and verbal abuse and religious persecution. One young person explained his situation, saying;

If he punches you or he fights with you, you can't complain if you don't have documents. Sometimes you have a problem like someone takes your mobile phone – but you can do nothing because you are like a thief to the police – if someone is cruel to you, you can do nothing. One man knows that I don't have documents, and all the time he is fighting with me and punching with me, and he knows I can't do anything because I don't have documents (YP12).

Some seven professionals shared experiences of disappeared young people they had kept in touch with being exploited in this way. One told that “young people experience lots of violence and abuse whilst they are street homeless – but because they can't rely on institutional support or go to the authorities, they are extremely vulnerable” (UKP3), and another explained that “young people are sometimes told ‘if you don't work for me or do what I want you to do, I will report you to the authorities and they will deport you’”(UKP4). One professional told of an Afghan boy he had worked with who had converted several years previously to Christianity, but had kept this secret. His conversion was subsequently discovered, and;

he lost both of his informal jobs in the space of two weeks because his Afghan employer found out he was a Christian... he got beaten up – it was essentially a form of religious persecution, but people knew he couldn't go to the police because he had no status and would be sent home. People repeatedly took advantage, beat him, took his stuff, borrowed money and never paid it back – all because they knew he couldn't go to the police.

Alongside falling victim to crime, some young people acknowledged that hopelessness and a need for money had pushed them into criminal activity. The majority of young people interviewed stated that they had never been involved in crime and would never consider this. Research carried out by Crawley et al (2011) found that there were very few examples of destitute asylum seekers being involved in criminal activity, as they are “extremely fearful of being caught by the authorities and deported”, but a couple of examples did emerge in the course of these interviews. Interestingly, every example was provided by a young person, rather than a professional.

One young person told of a friend of his who had been involved in shoplifting, whilst saying “I'm a good person, I have never even smoked, I have never done a bad thing... but sometimes this life, living like this, it does something bad to their minds, and when you need some food sometimes you do something bad to get it” (YP17). Another young person told

that “not letting people work leads to bad situations because people need money – so they do crime or drugs” (YP3), and another told that “because of their problems some boys chose a bad way, and do burglary or robbery” (YP14).

All but one of the young people who identified themselves as currently living outside of the system spoke of health problems, and more spoke of health problems encountered by their friends. One boy became upset when talking about his toothache, telling that “I need a filling in my tooth, but I went to the dentist and it will cost £80 because I would have to pay private” (YP3), and another said that “if you run away like that, when you get sick you have no doctor. My friends like this would send their friends to the doctor to pretend it was them, then give the medicine to them after” (YP10). Most professionals concurred that this was a significant problem, and one told of a young person who had absconded from a hostel in Dover, and was brought to her by another boy she was working with;

He had a toothache and his face was completely swollen. He had had this for about 6-8 weeks and he was in so much pain, he hadn't slept and he looked so drained and so pale. The boys that I work with kept telling him to come and see me. He was so terrified, he didn't want to get support from social services and be in the system because he is so afraid of returning... We referred him to a centre where you can see a doctor who will not ask any questions. After that he disappeared again – it was too much for him... I have tried to call him so many times and it's so sad (UKP9).

Perhaps not surprisingly, these difficulties combine to produce serious mental health and psychological problems in many young people who have disappeared. Several of the young people had self-harmed, with one arriving for his interview with bandaged wrists after cutting himself with a broken mirror. Young people spoke extensively about the depression and hopelessness they experienced, and their sense that they were in a metaphorical prison. An Iranian boy, who had been living like this for a year, told us;

It is like I am in a prison here ... I feel stateless – I can't go back, I can't go anywhere else, they don't want me here. I don't know what to do, I am just in between. They won't even send me back to Iran – the embassy there won't accept me (YP3).

Another Iranian, who cut off contact with services six months ago confirmed;

We are in a prison truly even if we look free.... I don't know what I can do. I don't know. Where can I go where they will let me have plans? Nothing is easy anymore, especially not the future. It has a bad effect on your mind when you are worrying all the time about what will happen to you in the future. At the moment I can't do anything. I just walk around town. There's nothing to do. Maybe I will submit another claim, but really I have no hope. You just sit at home and feel scared, or you have to go and do bad things... (YP5).

Some young people said that they tried to sleep as much as possible to pass time, whilst others found themselves unable to sleep due to anxiety. One boy told how he sits in his room in silence because he is afraid that if he makes a sound, he will be found, and another told how he tries to hide his face every time he sees the police. Several young people talked about

their distress at not being able to attend college, whereas for some young people, college was the one service they were still engaging with.

One professional observed that many young people had already experienced economic and sexual exploitation, poverty, health problems and psychological difficulties for months or years on their long and hazardous journeys to the UK, and “that a system should exist that results in them returning to that state is obscene” (UKP2).

None of the young people interviewed for this report who were living underground were more willing to consider voluntary return as a result of their experiences. In 2008, the Rt. Hon Iain Duncan Smith MP stated that “It appears that a British government is using forced destitution as a means of encouraging people to leave voluntarily. It is a failed policy” (Centre for Social Justice 2008). The persistent refusal of the destitute young people interviewed for this report to consider voluntary return certainly seems to confirm this assessment. For many young people who disappear, however, the final outcome, whether after a few months or a few years, is forced removal from the UK.

Detention and forced return

At that time my tears just came down my face... People say waiting is bad, but at least those people had a few more years of being able to study and work. I got a fast no and now they will send me back: it is awful (YP3).

The fear of returning home that young people talked about in the context of AVR and disappearance was, without exception, amplified for the young people who had been detained or issued with removal directions. Words and phrases including “afraid”, “scared”, “you panic”, “it isn’t safe” were repeated, along with phrases such as “it feels like there is no point”, “you give up”, “we have no hope” and “I am depressed”. Several young people told stories of friends who had self-harmed in IRCs, with one boy telling us;

One day I called [my friend], when he was in the detention centre. He was crying, he wasn’t eating, he beat himself against the wall – his head and his hands. When he did this the blood came on his head and hands (YP15).

Of the young people who had exhausted all their appeal rights, five explicitly spoke about committing suicide should they be forcibly removed. One told us; “if the government send me back I will kill myself, and then on that day they will know how much I was afraid and how my situation was so bad... so bad that I accept all of these difficulties now, and in the end if there is no way for me I will kill myself” (YP13).

Another explained that “if they do this to me I will go on the top of a mountain and suicide myself. Or I will try to put myself in the road when a big lorry is coming fast” (YP15). Several support workers told that young people regularly spoke to them about taking their own lives when they became appeal rights exhausted, and a professional working with detained asylum seekers reported that they regularly had to ask IRC staff to put detained young people on suicide watch (UKP5).

Other young people, including several who had had removal directions issued, were not able to engage with the concept of returning home. A boy who had exhausted all his appeal rights but had not yet been issued with removal directions said “I don’t want to think about going

back I don't want to think about the bad things - when I think too much my whole body is sweating" (YP16).

Professionals reported their difficulties in helping young people to prepare for possible enforced removal, partly because they had little experience of or training about the countries young people faced return to, and partly because "it's so hard to even talk about this with young people" (UKP3) as they "don't want to even engage or think about it because they are too scared" (UKP1). The same support worker explained how she visited a young person in detention "and tried to prepare him for the worst, and bring him his stuff but he said no not at all, he didn't need it, as he wouldn't be going back. He was totally in denial" (UKP1).

In this section we will provide a brief overview of the concrete fears young people in the UK expressed about returning home, particularly to Afghanistan. In the following section we will examine whether or not these fears materialize on return to Afghanistan.

Firstly, 15 young people talked of their fears of violence – both generalized violence in Afghanistan, and violence resulting from specific threats or contact with the Taliban. Several young people felt that the violence (particularly bomb attacks, suicide attacks and mines) in Afghanistan was self-evident, and repeated that "the UK government knows about the situation of Afghanistan, everyone knows there is fighting and war there" (YP12, with similar comments from YP16, YP8, YP24 and YP2).

One young person had recently seen a news broadcast about the death of British soldiers, and was afraid, saying "if they can't save themselves with all the support they have, how will I survive?" (YP16). Individual and specific threats were also a significant fear, with young people telling that they feared for their safety for reasons including offending powerful individuals, being the child of someone who had been killed in a feud, having a sister who had run away from marriage to an influential man, having converted to Christianity and being an ethnic minority (particularly Hazara).¹⁰

One young person summarized "there is no law there – if someone has money and power he can do what he wants. If he wants to kill you no-one will stop him" (YP10). Four young people were afraid that they would be forcibly recruited by the Taliban, one of them saying:

I am going to die, they will make me to be a killer... this is what they are doing these days with boys who have no-one – they are taking them and then washing their brains and then they use them to
The majority of UK professionals interviewed also expressed serious concerns about young people being either killed or forcibly recruited by the Taliban.

Other young people feared sexual violence or forced marriage. Several professionals reported that young people had mentioned their fear of this to them, and although only two boys interviewed explicitly mentioned this, one explained do suicide bombs and things (YP17).

¹⁰ While consolidating their control over Western and Northern Afghanistan from 1996 to 2001 the Taliban, who are ethnic Pashtuns and Sunni Muslims, are reported to have carried out multiple massacres of ethnic minorities. Of particular note is the targeted killing of Shia Hazara men, women and children in Mazar-i-Sharif in 1998.

Those who tell you they fear, it's not just the Taliban and the fighting situation. Some of them are embarrassed and shy to say, but I will say it: rape is not just a problem for girls. Rape is a big problem for both boys too. Especially for boys like me who don't have family or a father or uncle to protect me. If they know that I don't have any male relatives, they might abuse me. This is a big problem nowadays and how could we survive after this? There is no difference between young girls and young boys. Most of the boys are just embarrassed and ashamed to say this to you (YP16).

Secondly, young people were afraid of being alone in an unfamiliar environment. Several spoke not of specific, personal fears, but of the fact that they lacked the protection of the family unit in Afghanistan. Some 12 young people said that their parents had either been killed, or they did not know where they were, stressing that "if you have no family you have nothing – family is everything there" (YP2). Other young people were not from Kabul, and worried that they would be lost without family in an unfamiliar city.

Professionals were also concerned about the UKBA's position that individuals from provinces could relocate to Kabul on return, saying "we would never tell a young person whose family have died in Manchester to just move to Glasgow and they will be ok" (UKP9). Even young people who had previously spent time in Kabul felt that they had culturally adjusted to life in the UK. One told us that "all of my habits have changed here - I have accepted things in this culture. Now it's so difficult for me to think of going back. I have changed myself and I don't fit with Afghan society any more" (YP13, with similar comments from YP2, YP15, YP8, YP21 and YP17).

These concerns notwithstanding, it is important to note that three young people did share about ongoing contact with their families, and one professional talked of a young person she worked with who "was desperately sad to have come [to the UK] and said he didn't want to leave in the first place – they feel they can't go back, but often the choice to come was not theirs, and they really do miss their families" (UKP13).

Thirdly, three young people were afraid that as returnees from Europe, they would be associated with the West, and that this would increase their vulnerability. The two key issues appeared to be that they thought they might be seen as a spy, or that people may assume they had large sums of money and attack or kidnap them for this reason.

Finally, as when discussing voluntary return, nine young people told of the lack of opportunities they would find in Afghanistan. It was generally considered unlikely that employment would be found, with one boy telling that "if you don't have family who will give you work? If you don't have a good reference there is no job for you –and I can't have this because I don't know people" (YP14), and that consequently young people would "become a criminal or a smuggler or mostly just do nothing and smoke cigarettes and drugs... people don't want to go back to this" (YP13). Another young person told us "I just want to study and make a future like any other young person that is in the UK. I will never be able to do this there" (YP15).

It is clear that young people's perceptions of the UK, particularly the UK government, alter as forced removal becomes imminent. Several young people spoke of the high opinion they had held of the UK, saying "when I came here I was so happy, because here people are

peaceful and they accept you whoever you are” (YP18), and “I always knew that people in the UK were good, and that here there is safety and everyone can study” (YP22).

Some young people facing removal retained a positive attitude towards the UK, saying “even if they send me back I will never forget the good people who have helped me here, never” (YP17), and “always I will remember that this country gave me some good education and I was safe here, even if it was only for a few years” (YP7). Others, however, spoke bitterly of their disappointment and anger. One young person told us that;

In my country there is no government and no human rights, and everyone knows that – but here they speak about human rights all the time, but they don’t do it for us. None of my friends has a good memory of the UK government because of this (YP13).

Another reiterated that “the English government and people said in this country everything is fair, and here there are human rights, but nothing is fair” (YP16). One of the professionals interviewed told how she had seen many of the young people she worked with become “very angry and bitter” (UKP12), and another told that “some young people tell me that a lot of returnees are very angry, and they do join the Taliban because of that” (UKP9).

One professional elaborated that “they feel like they are criminals and we can’t underestimate the effect of that – we can’t explain to them fully, look this is just the way our asylum system works. If you’re put in jail you feel like a criminal, end of story – you don’t feel like the product of a fair process, you feel like a criminal and that’s it”.

A young person shared his experience of this feeling, telling us “I feel so angry because there is nothing I can do... people at the mosque tell me I should just go back and fight a jihad there because this country has given me nothing in the end” (YP11). He explained that “I don’t want to do this, but you start to see why people feel so hopeless, and also people do anything when they need to survive”.

It is clear thus far that young people facing forcible removal from the UK are acutely afraid, and feel hopeless and depressed when they consider their possible future. This fear and hopelessness means they refuse to take voluntary return, and are willing to risk exploitation and serious health problems through disappearing in order to avoid detention and return. However, these young people are not monitored once they leave the UK, and there is therefore little documentation of the risks that they actually face, and whether or not their fears are unfounded or realized. The next section of this report examines the stories of young people returned to Afghanistan, and the experiences of Kabul-based professional working with young people, in an attempt to explore this complex area.

Forced return: what are former unaccompanied minors returning to?

In 2011, 8,869 people who had previously claimed asylum departed the UK. This represents a 15% decrease compared to 2010, and is 51% lower than in 2006 (UKBA 2012b). The lower figures for people leaving the UK should be understood in the context of the diminishing numbers of asylum applications. As the table below illustrates, the majority of these departures were not as a result of the Assisted Voluntary Returns programmes, but were rather enforced removals and notified voluntary departures. A significant proportion of those

who returned were Afghan nationals aged between 18 and 24. This section focuses on the experiences of Afghan former unaccompanied minors forcibly removed to Kabul.

Type of Return		2011	Afghan Nationals	Afghan nationals aged between 18-24
Total Returns (Including Non-Asylum Cases)		52,526	1,917	1,038
Returns from Asylum Cases	Enforced removals and notified voluntary departures ¹¹	6,384	1,130	Not available
	Assisted Voluntary Returns	2,003	335	Not available
	Other voluntary departures ¹²	482	55	Not available
TOTAL ASYLUM RETURNS		8,869	1,520	Not available

Although it is not clear how many of these young Afghans entered the UK as unaccompanied minors, information provided to Refugee Support Network in April 2012 as a result of a Freedom of Information (FOI) request showed that the number of former unaccompanied minors forcibly removed from the UK is increasing rapidly. Whilst only 20 of these young people were forcibly removed from the UK in 2009, this figure increased more than three-fold to 70 in 2010, increasing again to 100 in 2011.

This increase can be viewed in the context of the resolving of legacy cases and the increasing impact of the NAM, which promised faster decisions¹³, and the increased emphasis that the agency is placing on enforcing removals of individuals who are ARE.

These young people leave the UK after spending some of their formative years here, in the care of British Local Authorities. However, the UK's Independent Asylum Commission found that there is no monitoring of what happens to forced returnees once they have left the UK (IAC 2008). In response to this finding, UKBA confirmed that;

There is no post-return monitoring or sustainability programme for those persons who choose not to return as part of an assisted voluntary return package and whose subsequent removal from the

¹¹ The term 'notified voluntary departures' applies to individuals against whom enforcement action has been initiated, but who have made their own arrangements to leave the UK and have informed UKBA of their intention to depart. These departures are commonly grouped together with enforced removals in UKBA statistics.

¹² The term 'other voluntary departures' applies to individuals who have left the UK voluntarily without the support of an AVR programme, and without notifying UKBA, but who have been identified through data matching exercises such as at embarkation controls or through passenger data supplied by airlines through the e-borders system.

¹³ Many former unaccompanied minors whose cases were dealt with by the Case Resolution Directorate as legacy cases were granted Leave to Remain outside of the normal immigration rules, in recognition of the fact that they had waited up to five years to receive a final decision from UKBA. The NAM aims to process cases within six months. It follows that proportionally more of the cases dealt with under NAM will receive negative decisions, as there is no need to consider the impact of waiting five years for a decision.

UK is enforced. However, removal will only be carried out where it is considered both appropriate and safe to do so... We believe that the best way to avoid ill-treatment is to make sure that we do not return those who are at real risk, not by monitoring them after they have returned.

The key issues that emerged include the vital role of extended family networks in reintegration processes, the impact of generalized insecurity and poverty in Afghanistan, a lack of education and employment opportunities, the perceived ‘Westernisation’ of returnees and the existence of mental health issues. The risk of forced recruitment by the Taliban or other anti-government groups was also examined, along with problems resulting from feuds, forced marriage and abuse. Interestingly, it was clear that the migration cycle does not necessarily end with forced return to Afghanistan, with many young returnees aiming to leave again as soon as possible.

The impact of these issues on children in Afghanistan has been extensively documented, and international analysis has repeatedly highlighted violations against children and the increasing impact of conflict on Afghan children (UNHCR 2011a, UNHCR 2011b, United Nations Security Council 2011 etc). The recent case of *AA (unattended children) Afghanistan CG [2012] UKUT 00016 (IAC)* in the UK has also found ‘that unattached children returned to Afghanistan may, depending upon their individual circumstances and the location to which they are returned, be exposed to a risk of serious harm, inter alia from indiscriminate violence, forced recruitment, sexual violence, trafficking and a lack of adequate arrangements for child protection’¹⁴.

In contrast, importantly, it was not found that violence in Afghanistan had increased to such a high level that the adult civilian population were generally at risk. It has been suggested however, that “the considerations in the judgment relating to the best interests of children and the risk of specific kinds serious harm to unattached children in Afghanistan should also be seen as relevant to those *former* unaccompanied asylum seeking children who have turned 18” (Lyll 2012), in recognition of their particular vulnerabilities as youth (Elwyn 2012). This research demonstrates that former unaccompanied minors aged between 18 – 24 cannot always be treated straightforwardly as adults, but that they face risks in a variety of areas.

Vital importance of family

The essential role of the family and community networks in providing protection, opportunities and mobility in Afghanistan is well documented (ICG 2009, UNHCR 2010, Still Human Still Here 2012 etc). Indeed, UKBA (2012c) acknowledge that “Afghans rely on these structures and links for their safety and economic survival, including access to accommodation and an adequate level of subsistence”. In the same document they note that as all returns are currently to Kabul, if this constitutes internal relocation, “availability of traditional support mechanisms, such as relatives and friends able to host the displaced individuals” must be taken into account.

¹⁴ This case involved a 17 year old young person from Afghanistan, and has the potential to affect future claims for humanitarian protection by unaccompanied minors. Whereas a previous influential case, *HK and Others (minors – indiscriminate violence – forced recruitment by Taliban – contact with family members) Afghanistan CG [2010] UKUT 378 (IAC)*, held that ‘children are not disproportionately affected by the problems and conflict’, the tribunal here found that the above risks of serious harm to unattached children ‘will have to be taken into account when addressing the question of whether a return is in the child’s best interests’.

They do, nonetheless note that single males may “in certain circumstances, subsist without family and community support in urban and semi-urban areas with established infrastructure and under effective Government control”. Nonetheless, whether or not forcibly removed former unaccompanied minors are able to access traditional family support networks is of vital importance in assessing their chances of reintegration – the young people and Afghanistan-based professionals we spoke to had a range of experiences of attempting to find relatives, and indeed of the response of these relatives to the returning young people once found.

The necessity of finding family, or extended family networks was not disputed by any of the Afghanistan-based professionals interviewed, who confirmed that in their experience “all the risks are exacerbated for young people who find themselves adrift” (AP1), that “if you don’t have a family how do you build a life, because everything is done through family” (AP3).

The likelihood of separated young people finding these vital family and community networks was however an area of disagreement. One professional who had worked with returnees stated that “the vast majority of unaccompanied young people will become accompanied as soon as they leave the airport” (AP6), and another explained that;

All a young person has to do is go back to his village and he will find his family. If a boy doesn’t know where his family is, he will be asked ‘where are your people from?’ Then someone will say, ‘ah people from this area live over there’, so they will find someone (AP8).

The same professional clarified that young people were often genuine in telling UK professionals that they had lost contact with family, saying that “they can’t find them overseas because they lose numbers, but in country they can because of the word of mouth networks”. She continued “the number of young people with dead fathers is extremely high, and they won’t find their mother because women aren’t known on the street, but they will find some male relative somewhere”.

Another professional had found that most young people “have resources and strong family networks” (AP4), but reiterated that “the true orphan alone really would end up on the streets”. Of the twelve returned young people whose stories were shared, five had managed to find family members, and were living with them, with several telling that they were happy to see their families, particularly their mothers, after many years. One UK-based professional told of a young person who she had kept in touch with who “was OK and starting to settle in” (UKP4).

Other young people however, had struggled, with several making many fruitless trips back to their villages to search for relatives. One boy believed his family to be in Pakistan and another believed his to be in Iran, but was not sure. Another boy had managed to find his sister, but was not prepared to go back to the village, as he believed it would put her and his brother-in-law in danger, whilst others found accommodation with friends of their families, but had subsequently had to leave for a variety of reasons including fights and rumours of Taliban targeting. Another boy mentioned specific problems locating his mother telling that the international organisation he contacted told him they were not able to make enquiries about lone females due to societal constraints.

A number of professionals also disagreed with the assessment that all young people would easily be reintegrated into family networks, citing the “state of flux in Afghanistan, and the high level of refugee movement – some young people discover their families are in Pakistan and so are not able to reintegrate” (AP2). Another confirmed that “families that were in Pakistan may be in Iran – even communities in Kabul are really fluid, and people move around a lot. With kids coming back from Iran, we have found it hard to trace their families, although the mullahs can help trace some people” (AP3).

Another professional working with children returned from Iran had found it “extremely difficult” to help returnees find their families, particularly when security concerns meant that “we could do no field visits or serious follow up assessments in the provinces... the reunification process was lacking and more follow up was needed” (AP12).

For those young people who are able to locate family, the response of the family to the returning young person varies, as does their subsequent life with that family. Although the majority of professionals said that in most cases located families were happy to receive them back, at least in the first instance, one boy shared a very different experience. From Mazar-e-Sharif, he was returned to Kabul, where he had distant relatives. When he approached these relatives and told them he had been in detention in the UK they rejected him and threw him out of the home, saying he must be a criminal, otherwise he would not have been detained.

Several professionals indicated that even relationships which start well can quickly become troubled, particularly due to the shame associated with returning empty-handed from abroad. One professional, who had worked with families in Afghanistan for over fifteen years, confirmed that “the son’s job is to provide for the family – for many families this is purpose of sending them overseas, so the shame is that they have gone to Europe and not succeeded – if they come back they have to face this shame” (AP8). Another Afghan confirmed that;

Coming back to my country with nothing is a big problem for these boys because they are faced with relatives who say ‘why have you come back with nothing?’ This causes stress and shame. I know ne Afghan boy who arrived in the UK as a minor, who got returned. Before he left his father sold the house so he could leave, and now he comes back with nothing. It’s important to understand how this works in Afghanistan: in my country if a father has a house and he dies, they split the house between the sons. So when this father sold the house all because of one son, so he can go to London, the other brothers and sisters have been waiting for the money to come back from London for their marriages etc. There is a duty and a debt there. If he comes back with nothing, they will be so angry that he has done nothing for his family (AP5).

Another professional reiterated that families make “huge sacrifices to smuggle them out - the going rate is \$20,000, and they hope they will be able to build a positive future and support their families” (AP7), and another that “coming back empty handed they do face anger and guilt” (AP6). One of the professionals highlighted the power of this shame, telling us “these boys feel so guilty and bad that their families are in this situation for them – they sold everything, and they will bring nothing back. Some boys say I must go and speak with the Taliban, I will suicide myself because my situation with my family or other people is so bad” (AP5).

Another interviewee, who had worked with young asylum seekers in the UK and was now living in Kabul, felt that if families had a better understanding of life in the UK for a young asylum seeker and their chances of getting refugee status, then many would not have sent their children away. He explained that “the young people in the UK are so depressed because they have been coerced and sent, and their heart is not really in it. So the sooner the sending can stop the better, because there are a lot of highly motivated, alive, good fun young people here, and it really bothers me that they are sent away to the UK only to return with nothing” (AP6).

The shame of returning home to the family empty handed is exacerbated by family expectations that as a result of their time in the UK, “they should be able to walk into a \$500-\$600 a month job – then I meet the boys and they speak English like five year olds. Their families sent them expecting that they would either succeed overseas or come back with marketable skills and they do neither” (AP8).

For other young people, the difficulties were being seen as an outsider, who has experienced a different culture. Several professionals had worked with young people who struggled to integrate socially, and had great difficulty re-adapting to a strict cultural code of behaviour, suffering, essentially, from re-entry culture shock. They have “seen another life” (AP6), and are suddenly “not allowed to make decisions, but have to submit to whichever older male relative they have found” (AP10).

Some find that they are ostracized or cannot communicate well anymore, particularly when returning to communities where people have never left Afghanistan (AP11). One professional who had worked in several Afghan provinces told us that

In Mazar a young guy started to talk to me in English in the street. I told him you shouldn't be speaking to me (because I know that it is not culturally acceptable for men and women who do not know each other to converse on the street in Mazar) and he chased me down and said I have been in the UK since I was 12, and I've come back and no one will talk to me, please, please just talk to me. So I walked with him and talked with him. He was grieving: his grief was that the community didn't accept him because his Dari wasn't good any more as he was young when he went to the UK. He didn't come back to live with his immediate family as they had died, but he had to settle his father's estate – but the community saw him as an outsider and his biggest problem was social (AP8).

Whilst opinion is clearly split over whether or not young people will quickly and easily be reintegrated into extended family and community networks, the experiences of these young people suggest that caution should be exercised by case-owners assessing the likelihood of such reintegration.

Generalized insecurity

In 2011, the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) documented 3,021 civilian conflict related deaths in the country – an eight percent increase from 2010, and a 25 percent increase from 2009. Some 77 percent of these deaths were attributed to anti-government elements, and the increase can be viewed in the context of the increasing use of

improvised explosive devices (IED), deadlier suicide attacks, and the targeted killing of civilians (UNAMA 2012).

The total number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Afghanistan now stands at almost 500,000, a 45 percent increase in people internally displaced by conflict compared to 2010 (UN General Assembly 2012). The Afghan NGO Security Office (ANSO) noted that opposition attacks increased to 40 a day in the first six months of the year, up 42 percent since 2010 (Human Rights Watch 2012). UKBA's (2012c) Operational Guidance Note for Afghanistan also cites Dr Antonio Giustozzi, an Afghan country expert, who notes that violence has both expanded geographically and intensified, with just one province out of 34 unaffected by violence (Panjshir).

As noted above, forcible removals from the UK are to Kabul, which UKBA maintains has "remained largely insulated from the worst violence... While insurgent violence has expanded steadily throughout the country, Kabul has remained relatively quiet, although there are isolated incidents, some of them serious" (UKBA 2012c). Whilst Kabul is clearly significantly more peaceful than other regions, the table below illustrates that the conflict has intensified in regions outside of the southern provinces where violence has historically been concentrated, with a notable 80 percent increase in civilian deaths in the central region which includes Kabul.

Deaths in Kabul itself have increased from 23 in the last half of 2010 to 71 in the last half of 2011, largely as a result of suicide attacks (UNAMA 2012). It has been suggested that the increasing number of civilian deaths in these central and eastern provinces is in part due to corruption within Afghan security agencies, which has facilitated insurgent access to urban areas (Rondeaux 2011).

Although capacity of the Afghan police force in Kabul has increased from 5,000 officers to 18,000, and the army has developed a 7,000 strong unit with a particular focus on protecting the capital, UKBA notes that their ability to limited, as "the Taliban have continued to successfully target both perceived opponents and civilians in Kabul in recent months" (2012c:3).

Recent suicide attacks in Kabul include, but are not limited to, an attack near the parliament in January 2012 (AlertNet 2012); an attack on a shrine packed with worshippers in December 2011 (BBC 2011a); an attack on the British Embassy in August 2011 (Sharifi 2011); an attack on a police station in June 2011 (Reuters 2011); an attack on the Inter-Continental Hotel, also in June 2011 (RadioFree Europe 2011); and an attack on Kabul Military Hospital in May 2011 (New York Times 2011).

There have also been two recent coordinated gun and rocket attacks on Kabul, one in September 2011 which lasted for 20 hours and targeted the US Embassy, NATO Headquarters and police buildings (BBC 2011b), and one in April 2012, part of a Taliban 'spring offensive', described as "perhaps the most ambitious of Taliban attacks on Kabul in more than a decade" (Graham-Harrison 2012). There are fears that violence in Kabul may increase further as US and British troops begin to withdraw from Afghanistan over the next two years (Rondeaux 2011).

Region	Number of civilian deaths in the last half of 2011	% increase or decrease on 2010
South (Kandahar and Helmand)	290	- 39%
South East/East (Khost, Paktika, Ghazni, Kunar, Nangarhar)	446	+ 34%
Central region (including Kabul)	230 (of which 71 in Kabul)	+80%

The authors note that information about the generalized security situation in Afghanistan, particularly statistics and accounts of specific incidents will quickly become out of date. More specific and regularly updated security information can be found through a number of sources, including the UNOCHA Protection Clusters, ANSO and UNAMA reports, and country guidance cases.

The Afghanistan-based professionals interviewed confirmed that returning to this type of insecure environment is disturbing for young people. One told us that most of them are dependent on public transport to get around and that there have been “quite a few attacks on buses, so there is always that fear” (AP2).

Another told that for those who try to return to conflict-affected provinces to search for family, or because they find life unsustainable in Kabul, will risk “having to fight or getting killed by bomb or rockets” (AP7), and an Afghan NGO worker confirmed that “war between villages directly affects this age group – they have to be involved on one side or the other” (AP10). Two professionals suggested that the psychosocial impact of returning to a conflict-affected environment was just as damaging as the actual conflict, with one explaining that;

The main risk is still security – even in terms of the psychosocial impact, if you go back to a place with conflict that is a major challenge, especially if you are used to stability and access to services. To come back to ongoing conflict is shocking and frightening for them (AP12).

Another went further, suggesting that young people were “petrified” even when they were relatively safe, saying that “my colleague has experience walking through the centre of town with a recent returnee from the UK, and they are so afraid, even though they aren’t really in danger – a lot of it is all about perception” (AP6).

Poverty

Young people also struggle with the levels of poverty they often face on return. Afghanistan’s living standards are amongst the lowest in the world (CIA 2012), with only 48 percent of the population able to access safe drinking water, and only 37 percent using improved sanitation facilities. In Kabul, 80 percent of the population lives in unplanned settlements with limited access to basic services and poor sanitation (all IRIN 2011).

According to the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) food security is also a concern for urban returnees, who often settle in areas of Kabul where health hazards, including “open sewage and the accumulation of solid waste” are endemic (NRC/Altai 2010). This year, harsh winter conditions and insecure and insufficient shelter options lead to the deaths, in January and February, of children living in some of Kabul’s 45 informal settlements (UN General Assembly 2012).

All of the professionals interviewed agreed that poverty was one of the main challenges for returnees. One summarized that;

It’s extremely difficult to go back to Afghanistan after spending some years in an EU country – you face severe living conditions, lack of freedom of movement – poverty really. It is a major challenge, especially if you are from a rural area, and by rural I mean it takes at least 12 hours to reach the nearest place with a market (AP12).

Another professional who had worked in Afghanistan’s rural areas, and knew boys who had returned to their family villages, told that “to go to a place where the kitchen is in a mud room outside, where there is no running water or electricity and they can’t speak to girls – this is so hard for them and there is so much pain” (AP8), and a young returnee told that “it’s too difficult to live here if you are used to living in Europe. It’s going to be difficult to stay here now”.

Life in Kabul is also a challenge, particularly for young people whose families do not have a home there. Some shelters exist, but many returnees failed to meet their strict criteria. Returnees struggle to find places to stay if informal networks fail, “because security means everything is closed off, nothing has its name on it, so if you don’t know where you are going you are lost” (AP3). Poverty and homelessness leading to drug addiction was also noted to be a danger in Kabul, with two professionals telling of disused buildings occupied by heroin addicts.

One staff member of an international NGO told that “it’s prohibitively expensive to rent in Kabul because NGO staff renting has driven up the rental market” (AP3), and another confirmed that “if you want to live in Kabul, even for a simple one bedroom place with no luxury they will pay maybe \$300 per month. So your money will run out very soon. Clothes and food are also expensive these days” (AP5).

Problems with anti-government groups

Whether or not young people were likely to face problems with the Taliban, upon return to Afghanistan, particularly forced recruitment, was one of the most controversial areas of this research. As is clear in the sections above, young Afghans facing removal in the UK talk about this as one of their principal fears, and UK professionals were also very quick to cite forced recruitment and targeted killing by the Taliban as a key reason why young people should not be returned. However, the experience of professionals in Afghanistan and the stories of the young people who have actually been returned varied enormously.

A useful starting point is once again the distinction between adult and child. UKBA acknowledge that there are “numerous credible reports that the Taliban and other insurgent forces recruited children younger than 18, in some cases as suicide bombers and in other cases to assist with their work” from all regions (UKBA 2012c). In one incident, in the northern province of Badakhshan, residents apprehended a 16 year old boy, wearing a suicide vest on his way to attack a local mosque (Human Rights Watch 2011), and a total of 173 incidents of child recruitment (verified and unverified) to anti-government elements were reported to UNAMA in 2011 (UNAMA 2012).

To assume that this threat vanishes the day a young person turns 18 is perhaps unwise. UNHCR (2010) noted that “local inhabitants are reportedly coerced into supporting anti-Government groups through threats or the use of force”, and Refugees International (2010) reported that “near Mazar e-Sharif, displaced families indicated they would not return after the Taliban gained footholds and began to forcibly recruit young men, confiscate property and threaten locals”. Giustozzi (2011), however, found that “forced recruitment has not been a salient characteristic of this conflict. The insurgents have made recourse to it only very marginally”.

Interestingly, whilst a significant 34 percent of Afghans interviewed believed that people were coerced into joining, the principal motivating factor appeared to be the need for work and money. In a paper for the UK Department for International Development, Ladbury (2010) found that one of the common reasons young men joined the Taliban was to gain income and to improve their social status. Ladbury also found that young Afghans with frustrated aspirations who are un- or underemployed, and have a limited stake in society are more likely to join radical anti-government groups, a finding confirmed by Lavender (2011) in her study on Afghan youth.

The professionals interviewed had contrasting opinions of the likelihood of young returnees being forcibly recruited, or targeted and killed by the Taliban. One told us that “it is not a significant risk unless you are in the South, in Pashtun areas, as far as I have seen” (AP8), and another told that none of the returnees he had had contact with in Kabul had experienced difficulties of this nature, although he could not comment on the risk for those who return to provinces. Another agreed that in her experience it was not possible to say that there was no risk, but that “the risk is also exaggerated, unless they return to an affected province” (AP4), and another told that “this does happen in the south, but I have actually never personally seen it here [in Kabul]” (AP12).

Others however told us that “the university is certainly a recruitment ground – my friend taught there and this was a problem for her students” (AP1), and another explained that “lots of these guys coming back have lost their fathers, so some feel they have to chose a negative way... [clarified what she means]... some speak with the Taliban” (AP5). One talked specifically about the risks for young people who ran away to the UK to escape recruitment, saying that “if you have been recruited and you run away, you are in a lot of danger when you

It seems clear that the risk of forcible recruitment is higher in the southern provinces, and a study carried out in this region by the International Council on Security and Development (ICSD 2010) sheds some light on why Afghan boys and men join the Taliban. Of the 400 Afghan men interviewed, 95 percent believed that more young Afghans have joined the Taliban in the last year.Q2. Why do you think other Afghan men join the Taliban?	Number of respondents ¹⁵	% of respondents selecting this answer ¹⁶
Job or money	242	57%
Jihad	229	54%
Social status	155	36%
Coerced into doing so	147	34%
International occupation	34	8%
Actions of the Afghan government	6	1%
Lack of security	5	1%
Afghan politics	3	<1%
Other	3	<1%
Lack of education	2	<1%

return because you know people you shouldn't know and know things you shouldn't know and your family is also at risk because of this" (AP3).

Of the 12 returned young people whose stories were shared, only three had had concrete difficulties with the Taliban. One of these had received several threatening phone calls from members of the Taliban, telling him that he should not be working with the American company he had found employment with, but should be working for them. He began using a pseudonym to try to avoid being discovered.

Another had received similar phone calls, and told us that he just stayed in a small room, and felt too scared to go out. A third young person (see boxed case study below) had been told that the Taliban was looking for him, but had not been contacted directly by them. One boy who was still in the UK told us of a friend who had been working in a pizza shop in London, but was detained and returned. "Now I know he is working for the Taliban because my cousin has contact with him. This is what people do if they go back, there is no other choice for some people" (YP11).

¹⁵ Some respondents have indicated more than one reason for joining the Taliban.

¹⁶ *ibid*

Proportionally, then, less young people had had problems with the Taliban than had not. However, while the sample is small, it is significant that over 25 percent of these young people did encounter some kind of difficulty with the Taliban, particularly in light of the British Government deeming it 'safe' for all of these young people to return.

Case-study A: On a Taliban list

Zaman was studying ESOL in London when he received a final negative decision from the Home Office. When he turned 18 he was detained in Colnbrook Immigration Removals Centre, and, through the help of a charity, managed to find a solicitor who managed to stop his removal on one occasion. However, after a short while, Zaman's removal directions were re-issued, and he was forcibly removed to Kabul. Unusually, Zaman took a positive attitude to his removal, telling his ESOL teacher who visited him in detention that he was hopeful about making a new life in Afghanistan and talking positively about trying to find work.

Before Zaman came to the UK, his father was killed by the Taliban over a gambling debt that he couldn't pay. They also killed his mother, and an uncle paid for Zaman to leave Afghanistan. He had not remained in contact with his uncle.

Although not from Kabul, Zaman managed to make contact with a friend who had previously been forcibly removed: this friend offered him accommodation with him and his father. However, when he arrived at the airport in Kabul, an official told him that the Taliban had his name and were looking for him. This same official took pity on Zaman, and told him he could stay at his house for a week, where he would be safe. From here, Zaman made contact with the friend who had offered him accommodation, but as soon as this friend heard that the Taliban had Zaman's name, he cut off contact.

After a week, the official said he could no longer house him, and dropped him off outside the British Embassy where he said he would find help. The Embassy arranged a temporary safe house for a few weeks, and from there he moved into the home of another family where he was told he would be safe. He was essentially in hiding with this family, going out only once a day with the son of the family to walk around a park.

Zaman became increasingly depressed in these circumstances, and began to develop health problems. After a while he was taken to hospital in Kabul because of a heart problem. He came out of the hospital needing £350 to pay for further treatment. His housing situation also deteriorated, and he fought with someone in the house, and was told he could no longer stay there. Shortly after becoming homeless, Zaman stopped responding to texts, phone calls and emails from the UK.

(This story was shared by the ESOL teacher who visited Zaman in detention. He remained in regular contact with her, and she spoke over the phone to the airport official and to the British Embassy officials who were dealing with him. She became increasingly concerned about his health and safety, and wanted to help him meet the costs of his medical treatment. Sadly, Zaman disappeared before she was able to do so.)

Other feuds

We should also note that several young people spoke of difficulties stemming from blood feuds that were unresolved. Blood feuds are ongoing disputes or conflicts between parties,

often associated with cycles of retaliatory violence. These feuds are woven into the fabric of traditional Afghan culture, and are commonly motivated by violations (perceived or actual) of honour, property or land (UNHCR 2010). These long-running fights can result in the killing of individuals connected to both parties, both those responsible for the original offence, and others by way of association.

Although none of the professionals interviewed mentioned specific difficulties young people had encountered as a result unresolved blood feuds, the cases of two young people have touched upon this issue. The first case involves a boy whose sister had fled an arranged marriage to an influential older man. This man subsequently threatened to kill the brothers of the girl, and was known to be making enquiries as to their whereabouts. In the second case, a boy had seriously offended the son of an army commander before leaving for the UK, and on return had heard rumours that the commander had heard he was back and was looking for him.

Westernization

An area of difficulty on which wider research, Kabul-based professionals and experiences of young people concur is the problem of being associated with the West, either ideologically or in terms of wealth. It appears that the longer the young person has been away, and the further they have travelled, the more they are viewed with suspicion by other Afghans. The risks for people suspected to be ideologically aligned with, working or spying for the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) are well documented.

It is reported that individuals accused of ‘spying’ on behalf of international military forces have been executed by anti-government groups (UNHCR 2010), and the United Nations Security Council documented the case of a 15 year old boy abducted from a mosque and killed by the Taliban for the same reason (UN Security Council 2011). A member of the ISAF, responsible for training Afghan interpreters, told us that these young people and men found themselves in danger unless they were able to “completely hide the fact that they have been working for ISAF” (AP13).

This challenge is particularly aggravated for young people who are not able to reintegrate in Kabul, and have to return to the provinces to look for family members there, as this issue is “less problematic in Kabul, but is a problem in the provinces, if you are seen as not being ‘Afghan’”(AP3). Another confirmed a “higher risk in terms of people thinking that you had aligned with the West in some way” (AP9). An Afghan professional had experienced this difficulty with a returnee in her own family, telling us;

Last year, one of my brothers had to come back to Afghanistan from America, but he couldn’t go to our province, because the Taliban would say to him ‘You come from America, don’t you have money for us?’ And if you say no, they will think you are a spy. The Taliban know who ‘ordinary’ people are, and who has come from Europe or is working for the government or an INGO – they have information about everything... these boys are safer if they stay in Kabul... but they do also have spies there and they ask about people who are working with US/UK organizations or who have come back. In my province the Taliban have said that if you are working

for an INGO you should not come back to the province if you want to be safe (AP5)

The challenges of perceived westernization can also be of a religious nature. Several young people interviewed had been accused of not taking their Muslim faith seriously enough on return. The same Afghan professional explained that;

If they return to Afghanistan and are not praying properly, people say ‘see that they have come back from the West and they are not praying or going to the mosque anymore’, and they will say that they are not Muslim any more, and they will blame them, and blame the family for sending them away for money (AP5).

Another professional told of young people she knew, who had decided they did not believe in God anymore, but still attended the mosque for these reasons. Of course, if a returnee has not just neglected their practice of Islam, but is believed to have (or truly has) converted to Christianity, widely perceived to be a ‘western’ religion, the risks are heightened. One UK-based young person told us “of course, it is more dangerous if you have lived in UK, because the Taliban will ask you ‘why did you go there? You want to be a Christian?’ They will think you are a Christian and they kill Christians. I have heard some stories about this from two of my friends who were sent back” (YP1).

One of the professionals told us of a young returnee she knew who told her that he had converted to Christianity but “now has to re-submit to the Islamic practice – this is one of the things people look for, because one of the fears that people have here is that people who go abroad convert, so they are watching returnees” (AP8). Although UKBA have at times argued that converts can keep a low profile, she stressed that this “is not an acceptable answer – this boy knows he has to be seen to be actively practicing Islam regardless of what is in his mind or heart” (AP8).

The final risk of being associated with the West, is being perceived to be wealthy. Babak (2010) notes the risk of kidnap or robbery for those demonstrating signs of wealth, and Afghanistan-based professionals and young people agreed that suffering violence as a result of perceived riches was a problem.

Several returned young people had been mugged, and one UK professional told us of a boy she had remained in touch with who had told her that “there are people who hang around at the airport waiting for flights from Europe, to then target them for muggings because they think they are rich” (UKP10). Another young person, whose story is told first hand in the box below, experienced extreme difficulties, including kidnap and beatings, because of his association with the UK.

Case-study B: Kidnapped

“I arrived in the UK when I was 17 and stayed for six years. Then I was arrested at my house, and after two months in detention they sent me back to Afghanistan. First of all I was very happy that I can start a new life in Afghanistan, and I had a dream that at least I would have a good night’s sleep without worrying about immigration or police coming to get me, but I was very wrong.

After I arrived in Afghanistan, everyone was at least happy that I was well, and I was happy to find my family.

My problems started one night when someone came to our house, threatening me and my family, but we didn't think it was serious. Then after four months I got a call and the man said he was calling from the UN with good news from UK immigration, and I had been selected to come for an interview. I got very happy and said 'Wow, this is good news at last'. The guy told me to come to the city centre where he was meeting with a few more guys like me and he would drive us to the office for the interview. So I accepted and said yes.

But when I met them, three guys, wearing police clothes, grabbed me and put me in the car. At that point they put something on my mouth and I fell asleep. When I woke I found myself chained hands and legs in a dark, cold room and I had so much fear. I said to myself, 'so this is where your life will end'. I didn't know if it was night or day, and the guys were asking me so many questions: "What are you doing in Afghanistan?" "Who are you?" "Who are you working for?". I tried to tell them my story but they wouldn't listen to me. Then they started assaulting me and held a gun at my head. They said "You are not Muslim anymore, you have changed too much". I was begging them to release me, saying I have done nothing wrong, but they beat me again.

After about seven days, they brought me a mobile phone and said I had to tell them they would get my dead body if they couldn't pay \$300,000 in a few days. I told my family to do what they said and not to wait. My family didn't have that money, but they managed to sell our land – they got a bad price because they had to sell it so quickly, but they got around \$200,000. They had to negotiate with the kidnappers because this was all they had. After 20 days the kidnappers accepted the offer and released me. They told me and my family not to report it to the police or they would chop the heads of me and my family, so from that day I shut my mouth, I can't talk to anyone and neither can my family.

After I was kidnapped I planned to leave Afghanistan again, for the sake of myself and my family... I left Afghanistan in search of another society where I could live just as a normal person. I managed to reach Turkey, but then I was arrested because of being illegal immigrant, and they sent me back here again. Since they sent me back again I have been living a low profile, I don't go out if it's not really necessary, I don't sit with people, I never go outside when it is dark.

I was arrested and handed over to a warlord for drinking water in Ramadan, and they held me in a private jail for 24 hours even though I had reason to drink water because I was sick and had a doctor's receipt. Last month I had to change my mobile number because I was getting calls from extremist people saying they were going to kill me because I attended a Christmas party.

I don't know why all these things have happened, or what's my crime... maybe my only crime is that I changed in UK culture."

(Case study provided to authors by young person in Afghanistan who wishes to remain entirely anonymous)

Education and employment

Unaccompanied minors and former unaccompanied minors in the UK often describe education as one of the most positive and important things in their lives (RSN 2012), and are worried about the lack of opportunity they will have to continue their education and find employment on return to Afghanistan.

Although significant progress has been made in improving access to education in Afghanistan (primary net enrolment rates have increased from one million to seven million in the last ten years), 42 percent of all Afghan children remain out of school for reasons connected to poverty, vulnerability and conflict (Save the Children 2011). Only 49% of 15-24 year old Afghan males are literate (Lavender 2011), and attacks on schools by the Taliban and other militant groups have been well documented (UNESCO 2010).

Taliban attacks on schools have decreased over the last two years however, and the authorization to attack schools was removed from their code of conduct in 2009 (Giustozzi and Franco 2011). In return, it has been suggested that the government may be increasingly ceding to Taliban demands for control over curriculum, textbooks and the hiring of some teachers in certain areas, potentially enabling the Taliban to expand their recruitment base (Giustozzi and Franco 2011).

Regardless of the possible influence of the Taliban on education in certain provinces, professionals agree that there is an opportunity for education that did not previously exist. Returnees, however, face two specific problems: lack of appropriate school records, and low literacy rates in Dari or Pashtu.

One professional told of returnees who had no school records from Afghanistan, and who could therefore only be admitted to primary school, and another confirmed that “the Ministry of Education will not accept them [returnees] easily to complete their education because of their long absence and no Afghan certificates” (AP10). Another told us that as many had received little education in Afghanistan before leaving for the UK, and had then subsequently been educated in an English speaking environment, “they don’t even know their own language well, so they have to go to school with small children! They are too embarrassed to do this at that age” (AP5). A young person also explained that there was no opportunity for him to study in Afghanistan, because he had only ever been to school in the UK and was not literate in Dari.

Even for young people able to find families, and not affected by the two above-mentioned barriers, an Afghan professional noted that in villages there is limited access to education, and in cities the majority of families “don’t have the facility to support their children to complete their secondary and higher education because of economic problems”(UKP10).

It was also clear that young people seeking employment struggle enormously. Professionals and young people agreed that finding opportunities to work is extremely problematic without family connections, and one noted that “this generation has had more opportunities for education, but fewer opportunities after education” (UKP1). Attempts have been made to address the issue of youth unemployment at policy level in recent years however, and in 2007 the Afghan government joined together with nine UN agencies to develop the Joint National Youth Programme (JNYP). Amongst other objectives, the JNYP aims to provide livelihood and skills training, and a UNDP report on JNYP progress notes the establishment of resource centres, literacy centres, vocational training centres, micro-credit initiatives and education

support initiatives (UNDP 2009). The International Labour Organisation (ILO) has also partnered with the Afghan Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs, Martyrs and Disabled (MoLSAMD) to create Employment Services Centres (ESC), which attempt to match applicants with jobs. However, these centres have had limited success, with reports showing that only 20 percent of those assisted by the ESC are successful in obtaining employment (Lavender 2011). Lavender also notes, however, that the current number and quality of vocational schools are under-serving the young population, and that returnees in particular struggle to find employment due to a lack of officially recognised certification.

The professionals interviewed explained that within Kabul, returnees whose skill sets combined high levels of English with proficient written and spoken Dari or Pashtu and advanced computer skills were the best placed to find work, particularly within INGOs or other international companies. One professional had found that these young people were sometimes preferred because they have had experience living amongst foreigners. Several examples of young people working in this context were provided. However, most professionals also cautioned that large numbers of young men with similar skills were competing for relatively few roles, and so “a returnee has to be above and beyond a young person who has been to high school or college here” (AP8).

Another professional noted that “the NGO community is the main source of employment for well-educated young people, but no-one knows how this might change over the next few years if lots of NGOs leave” (AP3). Young people with this skill set were also possible candidates for working with ISAF as interpreters, many of whom relocate from Kabul for this work. However, a British trainer of these interpreters told us he would recommend this “only as a last resort” (AP13) because of the security risks both out on patrol and on return home.

For young people with skills, but without connections, one professional suggested that the best chance of earning money is through starting a viable business, particularly “anything that caters to the foreign market such as security, internet, mobiles, or fixing laptops. But some of this will change when the troops pull out so they’ll need a back-up plan” (AP7).

For young people without appropriate skill combinations, the outlook was somewhat bleak, and once again depended almost entirely on personal connections and networks. With such connections, work may be found, and one young person told us of his cousin who “was sent back to Kabul, and he is OK, he is happy now because he managed to get some work with a friend of our family” (YP11). One professional reported that young people were able to find work “if they have connections, like a friend who runs a shop” (AP5), but that otherwise they would face difficulties.

Unskilled work with INGOs, in security and driving was hard to find because “returning young people don’t tend to have the local knowledge or the relationships INGOs look for when recruiting for these roles - those people keep people alive, so their local knowledge is vital” (AP8). The limited work potentially available to young people who fail to obtain work with an NGO (whether through lack of skills or simply because there are not enough roles) includes working as a day labourer, mixing mud on the street, pushing carts and carrying things. Professionals found that there is often a stigma amongst returning young people around accepting such work and becoming a *mard-e-kar* (“a man of low work”), particularly when their own and family expectations are that they will find higher grade work as a result of their time in the UK.

Several professionals emphasized the importance of having a high standard of written and spoken Dari (particularly the formal *adabi* form) or Pashtu. One professional explained that “in Afghanistan there is a clear distinction between the literate and illiterate and this is measured in Dari and Pashtu not English – if they are not literate in their own language, their English and computer skills will be totally worthless” (AP8). Another confirmed;

the problem is that most of the boys who go to the UK don’t even know how to write their name in Pashtu or Dari when they leave. So they come back with some English (often fairly basic and with lots of slang) but no good written Dari or Pashtu – so how can they work in a good place? They have no other qualifications. In Afghanistan you need the baccalaureate – but they have nothing that is recognised in my country, so how can they find a good job? (AP5).

For young people unable to find positive employment, negative opportunities abound. The NJYP report (UNDP 2009) noted that many young people are involved in the drugs trade, often working in family owned poppy farms, or as carriers shuttling drugs to neighbouring countries. A 2006 article found that 20 to 30 percent of Afghans were employed in the illegal drug industry (Rudd 2006 in Lavender 2011), and an interviewed professional concurred, telling that “the drug trade with Pakistan, and the black market are where the opportunities are - to be honest the real opportunities are in smuggling or narcotics, or private militias and warlordism” (AP1).

Another professional had found that “lots of kids work in drug factories... there is just very little employment” (AP3). A young person told us that “the boys who are coming back to Afghanistan, we can do nothing here, we can just sit on the field and smoke cocaine, we can’t do anything good”. Another young person shared that;

drug dealing, this is the only way for us, taking heroin from one province to another one, because we need to somehow get money for ourselves. In Afghanistan there are lots of groups of boys who are involved in selling guns or drugs , this is another thing I can do – someone gives me a bomb or a pistol or a gun and asks me to sell it and I get 10%. There is no way for me to do good work, this is the only way to get some money. We are young and sometimes it is hard to think about good things, so people can tell us things we should do and it’s hard not to listen to them sometimes.

Case-study C: Finding work and problems

Mohammed was living and studying in Oxford, and had applied to extend his Discretionary Leave to Remain. When his application was refused, along with the subsequent appeals, he was forcibly removed to Kabul. Mohammed was afraid of the Taliban because he had joined them previously, and then ran away before coming to the UK.

Mohammed is not from Kabul, and has travelled back to his village three times looking for his family, but to date has been unable to find them. He worries about what might have happened to them, and is becoming increasingly stressed in Kabul. Mohammed was fortunate in that he was able to find work for an American security company, but has now started using a pseudonym because he is scared that the Taliban will find him. He has received threatening

phone calls from the Taliban, telling him that he shouldn't be working for their enemy, the Americans.

On several occasions Mohammed has been taken ill, but is scared that going to hospital in Kabul will lead to identification by the Taliban.

He had been living with a family friend in Kabul, who had been supporting him, but this friend recently had to move to another city, and Mohammed now feels alone. His other networks are in Pakistan. He says he is too scared to make friends, and that he doesn't talk to people about himself because he doesn't know if he can trust them. An Afghan friend from Oxford sends Mohammed money which helps him survive. After leaving the security company because of the Taliban threats, Mohammed eventually found work chopping wood, and did this for a couple of months – but his employer then disappeared without paying him, and is not answering his phone calls.

Forced marriage and abuse

Although the risk of forced marriage and sexual abuse of women in Afghanistan is well documented (Still Human Still Here 2012), evidence gathered for this report would suggest that the risk to young men is also significant. The United Nations Security Council (2011) described sexual violence in Afghan society as underreported, concealed and pervasive. Abuses are exacerbated by the fact that domestic legislation does not clearly separate the crime of rape from the offence of *zina*¹⁷, and sexual exploitation and abuses in homosexual relations have not been included in the Penal Code (OHCHR 2011). One professional told us that “sexual harassment and abuse is a big problem for those who end up on the street. It's common for boys to be victims of sexual abuse, even rape” (AP12), and another confirmed this, emphasizing that it was particularly an issue in southern provinces.

Alongside the risk of abuse is the risk of forced marriage, mentioned by four professionals as a risk faced by returnees who rejoin family structures. One explained that;

when the boys come back they face forced marriage. Their families want to marry them off and the sons often refuse to marry – this is a significant problem. Several boys I know in this position have been beaten by fathers for refusing marriage, and some run away again. This brings great shame – it's a social disaster, and those boys can't come home. Boys who have walked away from an engagement cannot come home without risking their lives (AP8).

None of the boys whose individual stories were shared had disclosed details of any kind of sexual abuse – however, as suggested in section 5.3 by the one Afghan young person in the UK who discussed the issue with us, most young people would be too embarrassed and ashamed to speak of it.

Mental health

One of the most concerning areas emerging from this research is that of the mental health of young forced returnees. Mental health difficulties are prolific in Afghanistan, and yet there is

¹⁷ Sexual relations outside of marriage.

just one state-run mental health hospital with 100 beds (Mojaddidi 2012), and counseling services are virtually non-existent for the majority of Afghans (Tearfund 2011).

All professionals concurred that mental health problems were a salient feature of the post-return experience for young people who had been in the UK. One told us that;

almost every young person who comes back falls into pretty serious depression from life circumstances. I see such listlessness, a kind of abandonment of any desire to live. The mental health problems so many Afghans have are exacerbated because they have tasted freedom and modernity and it's very hard to go back from that. (AP8).

Another confirmed that “returnees are going into what is already a highly challenging situation - but they have been exposed to another world and are being forced to accommodate a new situation. The shock and consequent depression are often acute” (AP2). Another simply stated that the young people she had seen “have no hope - they have lost hope for their country” (AP7).

One young person who had been forcibly removed to Afghanistan explained that;

After going through this many problems and suffering it had a great mental and health effect on my daily life. I don't know how I can express it but try to think and imagine how much life and day to day living can change. You will face big problems trying to learn and trying to accept and also trying to forget the past, which is hard. The health effects are that I become weak a person inside and outside. It causes my mind to let fear drive me, and sometimes I wake up in the middle of the night and I see all my body shaking. (Young person in Afghanistan who wishes to remain entirely anonymous.)

Leaving again

The cycle of migration does not end when young people are forcibly removed to Kabul. The majority of professionals interviewed told of young people's attempts to leave again, undertaking yet more high risk journeys to other countries. One professional told us that “about 80% immediately try to leave again for somewhere else. You get flavours of the month... it's Australia at the moment” (AP6), and another found that “they don't stay in Afghanistan for long – they move on again, they have seen another world” (AP2).

They may also try to leave for closer countries, with one professional telling of young people who, having spent all they have getting to the EU, then “try Iran – but Iran doesn't want Afghans so they wind up in jail, or just forced back again” (AP8), and another that they “go to Iran or Pakistan trying to find work, but because of expenses the smugglers do not manage their travel properly, which causes deaths and casualties on the way” (AP10).

Six of the young people whose stories were shared had tried to leave again, three of them had made significant progress before being sent back, and the other two had failed almost immediately. One young person, having initially failed to cross the border into Iran, tried to return to Europe. The professional keeping in touch with him told us that “the last time we

heard from him he was in Greece – he has our number and told us he was there, and planning to go to Finland or Norway. He said that everyone who gets returned is planning to leave again” (UKP12). One Afghanistan-based professional concluded that “it’s very difficult for them. The one I’m in most close contact with because he has stayed is very interesting – he has tried to get out again twice, but now finally he is thinking ‘I belong here, I’m tired of trying to run, I need to live life here’” (AP6).

Complexity

The experiences of these returned young people and the professionals who have worked with them are diverse. Some young people have managed to create a life for themselves upon return, whilst others have faced acute difficulties. Our hope is that their experiences provide some modest insight into the life chances of these young people who have spent formative years in the UK, and add to an understanding of how they might be better supported, both whilst in the UK, and, for those who must return, on return to Afghanistan.

Conclusion

The debate around the forcible removal of failed asylum seekers has become somewhat polarized in the UK. Whilst very much aware of this debate, this report does not aim to answer the question of whether or not people who have received a final negative decision on their asylum claim should be allowed to remain in the UK. Instead, we have sought to identify a particularly vulnerable sub-set of forced returnees: young people aged 18 - 24 who have spent formative years in the UK being looked after by local authorities as unaccompanied children.

What is clear from this research is that for a proportion of the young people the UK government deemed it safe to return, it has been anything but safe, and their experiences should be considered by case-owners making decisions about return of former unaccompanied minors. For others, although they have not faced specific threats on return to Afghanistan, they have suffered with cultural reintegration, lack of employment and mental health issues. Some have reintegrated successfully and built a life for themselves, but many have tried to leave Afghanistan once again. It is our firm conviction that we have a duty (moral if not legal) to these young people as ‘formerly looked after children’, which, at a minimum, should mean that those 18-24 year olds who must return are monitored, and that support is provided, both pre and post-return, to give them the best possible chances of success.

It seems clear that the UK would benefit from significantly altering the way in which it views these young people. The young people still in the UK that were interviewed for this report held high aspirations for their futures, hoping to be teachers, engineers, doctors, mechanics and architects. Interestingly, the majority of the young people, who all originated from conflict-affected fragile states, aspired not just to remain in the UK and contribute to society here, but, if it was safe, to one day return to their country of origin and contribute to building a future there. The damage caused by the limbo of DLR, the risks young people face through absconding in the UK, and the severe mental health difficulties and lack of opportunities they currently face on return, severely limit their chances of being able to contribute to either society.

The UK Department for International Development (DFID) prioritises investment in conflict-affected fragile states. It has invested heavily in Afghanistan in particular, and the vision for a “more peaceful, stable and prosperous Afghanistan” lead to a total programme spend of over £102 million¹⁸ in 2010-2011 (DFID 2011). If these young people were to be viewed as potential future leaders, invested in as such whilst in the UK and supported as such if they must return, those who stay would have considerably more to contribute to UK society, and those who are ultimately removed would, with the proper support and assistance, be significantly more likely to make a positive difference to their country of origin.

¹⁸This figure does not include a delayed payment of £85 million to the World Bank managed Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund as the IMF programme lapsed in the country. Future annual programme spend in Afghanistan is fully expected to include this figure, and is estimated at £178 million per year 2011 - 2015 (DFID 2011).

ACRONYMS

ANSO	Afghan NGO Security Office
ARE	Appeal Rights Exhausted
AVR	Assisted Voluntary Return
AVRFC	Assisted Voluntary Return for Families and Children
AVRIM	Assisted Voluntary Return for Irregular Migrants
DFID	Department for International Development
DLR	Discretionary Leave to Remain
ESC	Employment Services Centres
IDP	Internally Displaced Persons
IED	Improvised Explosive Device
ILO	International Labour Organisation
ILR	Indefinite Leave to Remain
INGO	International Non Government Organisation
IRC	Immigration Removals Centre
ISAF	International Security Assistance Force
JNYP	Joint National Youth Programme
MoLSAMD	Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs, Martyrs and Disabled
NAM	New Asylum Model
NDYP	New Deal for Young People
NRC	Norwegian Refugee Council
UASC	Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Child (or Children)
UKBA	United Kingdom Border Agency
UNAMA	United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan
UNDESA	United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
UNOCHA	United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
VARRP	Voluntary Assisted Return and Reintegration Programme

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