



Assessing the age of children seeking asylum: disputes between local authorities

'I was very confused, very scared and didn't know what was happening. I was petrified. I felt suffocated. I didn't know what was going to happen to me.'

'I was told I was assessed as an adult. I was sad to hear I was an adult. They put me in a vehicle. Once I arrived I was placed with adults aged over 30. The whole experience was really bad. I am depressed.'

When children arrive in the UK on their own and claim asylum they don't always have identity documents with them. Instead of accepting them as a child, local authorities frequently decide to assess their age. Too often they wrongly decide the child is an adult, often after a very brief meeting.

This means children can be moved to another part of the country to live in asylum accommodation with adults they have never met before. It also means their asylum claims are decided as if they were adults and they can face detention, removal or destitution.

Children in this situation come to us for help when they have been moved to the North West. We help them challenge their age assessment. However current guidance is unclear whether the original local authority (who decided they were adults) or the authority where they now live is responsible for re-assessing their age and supporting them.

This ambiguity leaves children in limbo while authorities haggle over who has a moral and financial duty for them. Children have told us this makes them feel scared, depressed, threatened and abandoned. They feel like they are being treated like criminals and that they are not listened to. They worry about being moved away from an area where they now have a support network.

Our [research](#) with social workers, lawyers and support organisations (funded by the Strategic Legal Fund) shows this is the situation across the country.

We are asking the Association of Directors of Children's Services, Department for Education and Home Office to amend their guidance so that when children challenge an age assessment, and they have been moved from one area to another,

- There is clarity over which local authority should re-assess the child's age and support them (their original local authority or, if new evidence comes to light in their new location, their current local authority),
- A dispute resolution mechanism resolves any issues between local authorities,
- Any delay in resolving local authority responsibility does not leave children unsupported and, most importantly,
- Children's voices are heard and acted on in the decisions that affect them, particularly about the suitability of out-of-borough placements.

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