

# Young Afghans facing return

Kim Robinson and Lucy Williams

**A project in the UK aiming to prepare young men for return to Afghanistan through an assisted voluntary return programme was unsuccessful. A different, longer-term approach might have been more appropriate and more effective.**

Unaccompanied children claiming asylum in the United Kingdom (UK) live in the precarious position of having to learn to adapt to their host country while knowing that they may eventually be returned to the country they have fled from. Local Authority Social Services departments are charged with their care under the Children Act 1989 but receive no funding once the children turn 18. At this stage, the young people's asylum claims are reviewed and in many cases they are deemed not to qualify for continued asylum. This article examines the case of six young people who, on reaching 18, were no longer eligible for care from Social Services and were identified as Appeal Rights Exhausted Care Leavers (ARECL) and thus subject to removal from the UK.

The Positive Futures Project was developed in recognition of the needs and vulnerabilities of young people facing the prospect of enforced return to Afghanistan. The basic aim of the project was to encourage these young Afghans to volunteer for Assisted Voluntary Return (AVR) by giving them some extra training and skills that would be useful once back in Afghanistan. However, the source of the Project's funding (the government's Return and Reintegration Fund) and its connection to the Home

Office meant that potential trainees were supposed to apply for AVR **before** they would be eligible for the training course.

AVR is one of a range of voluntary return schemes promoted by the UK government. AVR offers cash and support to ease the integration of migrants back into their countries of origin; such schemes are common but are controversial in that their 'voluntary' nature can be disputed in cases when migrants would prefer to stay but are obliged to return.

Existing evidence from our research and other studies of young Afghans presents a clear picture that young 'Care Leavers' do not want to return.<sup>1</sup> Many cannot imagine a future in Afghanistan and the continuing state of unrest in the country makes return an uncertain and frightening prospect. In addition, many young people have lost contact with family members and friends. Legal challenges to forced return are sometimes successful and, as of April 2015, the legality of charter flights taking Afghans back to Afghanistan is under challenge in the UK courts.

**“They said we must sign and go back...”**  
The Project did not succeed in persuading any of this group of young people to apply

for AVR. What was offered to them – training and the highest level of financial reintegration support available – did not outweigh their fears and concerns. A session with the Choices team, the NGO responsible for explaining AVR in the UK, was only scheduled at the end of the first week – when it became clear that the young people had not fully understood that they must commit to return to Afghanistan in order to receive the training. They all left the programme, angry and disappointed at how things had turned out. We were told:

*“We were thinking we can go to college, we can do anything, we can learn – but then they said we must sign and go back. I know that, I’ve been in detention ... they can give some money and you can go back to Afghanistan to live there. What am I going to do with that money if I haven’t got family? If I go somewhere and people see I’ve got money, they will steal it from me. They might kill me as well. It’s not right.”*

Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children need improved care, support and educational opportunities to help them prepare better for adulthood and to reduce the possibility of detention, destitution and deportation. More broadly, the study highlighted a complex area of immigration policy which, we argue, could be improved if local authorities’ obligations as ‘corporate parent’ focused more on the needs and futures of the young person than on wider political issues.

### Recommendations

Our recommendations challenge the culture of increasingly punitive migration controls and argue that public spending on these children could prevent longer-term problems for their well-being, political engagement and settlement.

**AVR and incentivising return:** There needs to be discussion early on in the establishment of care for young people in relation to preparation for potential return, particularly in terms of accessing education for future careers and business opportunities.

**Comprehensive training:** With a longer-term view, training could be incorporated while

they are still in care as minors. This could be jointly funded, through both the care and the training budgets, enabling support staff to work more closely with young people to overcome barriers such as finding suitable school places and access to continuing education.

**A cultural approach:** Encouraging a sense of belonging – either in Afghanistan or the UK – and bi-culturalism would help them to think positively about returning to Afghanistan. This could include literacy and age-appropriate fluency in their language of origin and building connections and social networks in Afghanistan. Family-tracing services could also be used more proactively to develop the few links these young people may have.

Furthermore, the funding for Care Leavers who are classified as Appeal Rights Exhausted (and therefore eligible to be deported) remains contentious. Local Authorities are financially responsible for providing care while the Home Office’s role is that of an enforcement agent. The resulting tension over financial liability needs to be resolved if more holistic approaches to the care and support of these young people are to be feasible. Equipping a young person with cultural skills appropriate to a future in the UK as well as in their country of origin has the potential to support them in building positive futures as contributing citizens wherever their lives take them.

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1. See for example Gladwell C (2013) ‘No longer a child: from the UK to Afghanistan’, *Forced Migration Review* issue 44 [www.fmreview.org/detention/gladwell](http://www.fmreview.org/detention/gladwell); Schuster L and Majidi N (2014) ‘Deportation Stigma and Re-migration’, *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, Vol 41 (4). <http://tinyurl.com/JEMS-2014-Schuster-Majidi>