



Roundtable Debate and Formal Launch of BME How will this country address the rights, care and protection of migrant children?

Stephen Briggs: Introduction.

Welcome to the launch of the Advisory Group for the safeguarding of BME and migrant children and this roundtable discussion. We, Victoria Climbié Foundation UK (VCF) and the University of East London (UEL) Centre for Social Work Research (CSWR), have established the Advisory Group as a multi-disciplinary response to identifying and responding to needs of migrant and BME children and young people, to protect their immediate and longer-term health and well-being. The advisory group aims to ensure that these children and young people receive support and protection provided by services, applying best practice.

In introducing the rationale for the Advisory Group I will mention 4 of the key issues:

Firstly: The extent and urgency of the problem:

Debates about migration are currently everywhere, yet there remain wide areas of misunderstanding – or not understanding. There are significant concerns that migrant children and young people are not receiving adequate access to essential services; this is partly through problems in service coordination (to which I shall return) but also through a deeper lack of understanding of diverse groups of migrants and their particular needs, cultures and experiences.

Unaccompanied minors are “the most vulnerable group. In most cases,they have suffered some form of psychological or physical injury or harm. Their development has often been impaired and their needs neglected” to quote Baljeet Sandhu, (Director of the Migrant and Refugee Children’s legal unit, House of Lords 2016, paragraph 26). The ramifications of failure to respond effectively – with understanding - to these vulnerable children and young people cannot be overstated. Over 70 years of research has shown that threats to attachment security lead to longer term difficulties, including for mental health, self-esteem, capacity to learn, work and relate, and a sense of belonging. A sense of belonging is crucial for development; it requires being ‘kept in mind’, over time, by at least one person in a caring or parenting role. It includes having access to one’s cultural heritage, including the importance of language through access to one’s mother tongue, as well as help integrating into the host culture.

Migrant communities, especially BME communities suffer negative attributions (racism); they need cooperation and support in working to safeguard children over the longer term,

as we will hear later in this meeting, including addressing some cultural practices that can lead to child abuse, and radicalisation.

Secondly, The effects of negative narratives:

Myths, misunderstandings and negative narratives (that can serve other purposes) are pervasive. These include: narratives of ‘deserving and underserving’ migrants: suspicion (of motives, age, etc). These narratives impact through all responses, from policy makers to what is in the mind of a professional practitioner working on the front line. Organisations develop risk-averse approaches based on the fear of adverse media publicity. These negative narratives and myths are hard to challenge; we need strong, authoritative counter narratives to underpin responses, in practice and policy, to promote understanding, based on data. Evidencing the experiences of migrant individuals and groups and the consequences of these (for health and wellbeing) is crucial. Safeguarding children relies on truths. The ‘truth’ of the needs of children/young people and their families has to be surfaced and communicated.

Thirdly: The effects of reduced resources

Reduced resources, following years of austerity, combine with currently increasing demands to undermine responses to the needs of migrant children. Services are less equipped to respond, they have less capacity. COMPAS (the Oxford Centre on Migration, Policy and Society) clearly document these issues in two reports, on statutory and voluntary organisations working with destitute migrants. Small organisations increasingly have to compete with each other to secure diminishing resources. Organisations work in silos and become ‘risk averse’, avoid taking on ‘unpopular areas of work’ and find it hard to effectively challenge negative narratives. We need to overcome fragmentation of the sector, as a priority, to create links across organisations, joint working and strategic alliances.

Fourthly: The importance of professional safeguarding (and child protection) interventions

Reduced resources, negative narratives, and the absence of clear and appropriate policy impact on practitioners. There is clear international agreement, based on the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) that the primary consideration when safeguarding children is to apply the principle of ‘the best interests of the child’. Yet the House of Lords report, *Children in Crisis: unaccompanied migrant children in the EU*, finds that “adherence to the ‘best interests’ principle appears to be a mantra rather than an effective guiding principle”. The report adds that to implement the ‘best interests’ principle in practice requires “overcoming many layers of prejudice, narratives of suspicion, hostility, and antagonism towards difference”. Policies need to embed the ‘best interests’ principle, whilst its interpretation requires skilful, informed and understanding professional practice interventions, coordinated across the different layers and contexts of practice.

We call upon policy makers, service leaders and practitioners in all sectors to identify and deliver co-ordinated, effective services for migrant children, young people and their families.

Key References:

House of Lords European Union Committee report – Children in Crisis: unaccompanied migrant children in the EU, July 2006

Price, J and Spencer, S (2015) Safeguarding children from destitution: Local authority responses to families with 'no recourse to public funds', Oxford: COMPAS.

Price, J. (2016) Meeting the Challenge: Voluntary sector services for destitute migrant children and families, Oxford COMPAS

Petch, H, Perry, J, and Lukes, S (2015) How to improve support and services for destitute migrants, York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation