



REFUGEE  
YOUTH  
SERVICE

REFUGEE YOUTH SERVICE

ANNUAL REPORT

SUMMARY

2023

# INTRODUCTION

It has been another successful year for Refugee Youth Service's (RYS). Our work throughout 2023 continued to focus on the UK, in response to the alarming number of age-disputed children housed in Home Office hotel accommodations meant for adults. As a result, we launched a new piece of work called the "No Children in Hotels" project. Meanwhile RYS continued to roll-out its Journey with an Unaccompanied Child capacity building training programme, reaching new parts of the country and individuals from a growing range of professions and occupations.

This took place in an increasingly hostile political context, with the *Illegal Immigration Act* (termed the anti-refugee laws) receiving royal assent in July. The government's plans to send 'illegal migrants' to Rwanda to make their asylum claims were hampered when the Supreme Court deemed it to be illegal, however at the end of the year the Safety of Rwanda Bill sailed through its second reading in the House of Commons. A range of experts from different sectors and professions have commented that there is little point in having a supreme court if a government can simply create new legislation to override a ruling that is not in its favour. One senior lawyer compared the government's action to legislating that 'black is white, and white is black'.

RYS continued its role as an intermediary funder for Comic Relief as part of its Across Borders grant originally secured in 2020. EPCAT France, which entered its third and final year of funding under this grant, continues to provide emergency support to unaccompanied children on the move in northern France. Additionally, RYS continued to support its sister organisation Velos Youth in Greece, with funding and in-kind support. Notably the Living the English Language programme, started at the end of 2022, has been a huge success. With support from RYS, Velos Youth has built a library at its day centre in central Athens, and is operating a comprehensive English language teaching programme.

This annual report summary gives an overview of each initiative, emphasising RYS's direct engagement with children and young people in the UK. As we conclude this report, we invite you to explore RYS's aspirations for the coming year. These ambitions reflect our ongoing commitment to adapting and evolving in response to the dynamic needs of the refugee youth arriving in the UK.

# NO CHILDREN IN HOTELS PROJECT

In the specific context of children seeking asylum in the UK, age is increasingly being wielded as a tool to exclude them from the support and protection that is rightfully theirs. A substantial number of children face the ordeal of having their ages questioned by border officials upon their arrival in the country, subsequently being erroneously categorised into the adult framework.

Despite the British government's repeated claims of widespread instances of adults falsely posing as children, research from a number of well-established independent organisations has contradicted this narrative with facts and evidence.

Findings from one 2023 report titled *Disbelieved and Denied: Children seeking asylum wrong treated as adults* by the Home Office (H4RN & Helen Bamber Foundation) revealed that in 2022, more than 800 children were inaccurately treated as adults by the Home Office. This resulted in them being placed in solitary accommodations alongside unknown adults or detained in immigration facilities, denying them the extra care and support they need, and putting them at significant risk.

RYS is therefore supporting as many children as possible to challenge the age they have been given, and enter the appropriate care setting. RYS pro-

vides emotional support during this process, and access to legal support where necessary. The project takes place across Berkshire and London and can be broken down into the following three domains:

1. Access to Rights
2. Improved Wellbeing
3. Capacity-building of the partnership network

During the first six-months of the project a total of ten young people were supported, with each initially visited weekly at their accommodation. Of these, one has been successfully recognised as a child, four have their age-disputes ongoing, whilst four unfortunately were discontinued on the advice of lawyers or because young people could not face the strain of court action.

In total twenty-nine referrals were made to other services, whilst twelve accompaniments took place to services covering legal, psychological and health needs.

Young people's progress is tracked across four key areas, as shown in the table below. Each area has a 1-5 scale that becomes a point on a diamond. The diamond is drawn, and re-drawn, which over time creates a visual representation of the progress made, thus also acting as a motivational tool.

OUTCOME AREA	AVERAGE CHANGE	% W/ INCREASE	% W/ NO CHANGE	% W/ DECREASE
ACCESS TO RIGHTS	2.3	100%	0%	0%
WELLBEING: ISOLATION & LONELINESS	1.6	71%	29%	0%
WELLBEING: PHYSICAL HEALTH	2.0	67%	23%	0%
ACCESS TO OPPORTUNITY	1.3	100%	0%	0%

## CHALLENGES

The intensity of cases, most notably and the frequency of serious mental health concerns, has also been challenging. Whilst self-harm and suicidal ideation were anticipated, the rate of which young people suffer these is alarming. The experience of RYS staff ensures that the appropriate actions and referrals are taken, and the correct recording and documentation is completed.

In light of the above, maintaining staff wellbeing is another core challenge and requires continuous effort, time and resources, and is a priority of RYS. The extra layers of support highlighted in the previous section have been implemented partly due to the aforementioned intensity of cases. Fortnightly reflective supervision provides a space for staff to discuss the challenges they are facing and reflect on their practice, with a psychotherapist. The main objective of this layer of support is to enable staff to develop their own coping strategies for the vicarious trauma they are liable to experience.

Sadly even when everything that can and should be done has been done, we do not always secure positive outcomes. This is partly because, and as we have become acutely aware, the system is prejudiced against age-disputed children. In some cases the Local Authority has been by-passed completely, and no Merton Compliant Age Assessment has been completed.

Where the Local Authority has completed a Merton Compliant Age Assessment, their reports frequently read more as character defamations (see full annual report for quotes) than as attempts to objectively assess a person's age. Where an age of majority is prescribed, it is not uncommon for the young person to leave the assessment unaware that they have the right to appeal within 90 days. Thus 90 days pass and the possibility of challenging the outcome greatly diminishes.



# JOURNEY WITH AN UNACCOMPANIED CHILD

The Journey with an Unaccompanied Child (JUC) capacity-building training programme, an initiative aimed at equipping individuals and organisations to better support unaccompanied asylum-seeking children, has marked significant progress over the past year.

The programme trained an additional 200 individuals across the UK. This brings the total number of trainees to over 500, collectively working directly with more than 1200 unaccompanied children. The programme's success can be attributed to its unique approach—immersing participants in the real-life journeys of four unaccompanied children, offering a comprehensive understanding unparalleled by any other training in the UK.

The quality of the training remains paramount, evidenced by the overwhelmingly positive feedback received. An astounding 97% of participants rated the training as either 'very good' or 'outstanding'. Such commendation not only reflects the programme's effectiveness but also underscores its significance in the realm of social work and child welfare.

The programme's innovative approach did not go unnoticed. We are proud to announce that Roseanna, the visionary behind JUC and a former Frontline Fellow, was been shortlisted for the Frontline Innovation Award. This prestigious nomination acknowledged Roseanna's dedication and innovative contributions to social work, particularly in creating transformative change for vulnerable children and families.

Recognising the value of lived experiences in enriching the training, we took a significant step in January by hiring a co-trainer with firsthand experience of arriving in the UK as an unaccompanied child. Massi Saffa, a talented actor, director, and facilitator, has joined the team and made a substantial impact. Massi's unique perspective not only enhances the training content but also creates a deeper connection with participants, fostering greater empathy.

As we reflect on the achievements and milestones of the 'Journey with an Unaccompanied Child' training programme, we are filled with gratitude and optimism. With the unwavering support of our dedicated team, trainers, and partners, we remain steadfast in our mission to create a more compassionate and informed network of support for unaccompanied children in the UK. Together, we continue this vital journey, shaping a brighter and more inclusive future for all.



# LIVING THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE: GREECE

The Living the English Language programme launched December 1st 2022 with lessons offered five days a week. The project is delivered in a partnership between Refugee Youth Service and its sister organisation Velos Youth. The project has been made possible with funding from the British and Foreign School Society.

Three levels are supported each day: beginner, elementary and advanced. Private tutoring is also offered twice a week. An 80-hour fast track English course is delivered under the project, which if attended is followed by a certificate of attendance. So far, 40 young people have registered for attendance cards, in order to start working towards the 80-hours. Ten students have already completed them, eight are over half way, nine have only just begun whilst 14 have not completed the fast track course as they have moved on to other countries in Europe and/or have taken on jobs.

The educator's methodology, designed in line with the young people's educational backgrounds, needs and levels of English (students go through a screening test before being placed at the appropriate level), has been proven to be effective. The majority of students have been demonstrating improved levels of punctuality, accountability and self-worth, as well as full compliance with the classroom rules and measures employed for the best results. The 80-hour English course continues to motivate and generate a fast learning mindset. What is also observed is a sense of belonging within the classroom and team spirit among the classmates.

The educator when identifying the progress of a student, ie. from elementary C to elementary D suggests the student to move on to the next level/class available so as to prepare for B1/B2 examination for an internationally recognised certificate. During this time, the technique of the examination is taught and practised and training takes place with regard to the four parts required.

Grammar, vocabulary, reading comprehension texts, speaking, listening and writing skills. Four young people who initially registered in the educational programme at A2 level in December moved on to B1 level, went through the preparation mentioned above and sat for the BCCE Michigan University certificate on June 17th 2023. All four were successful and in August received their certificate.



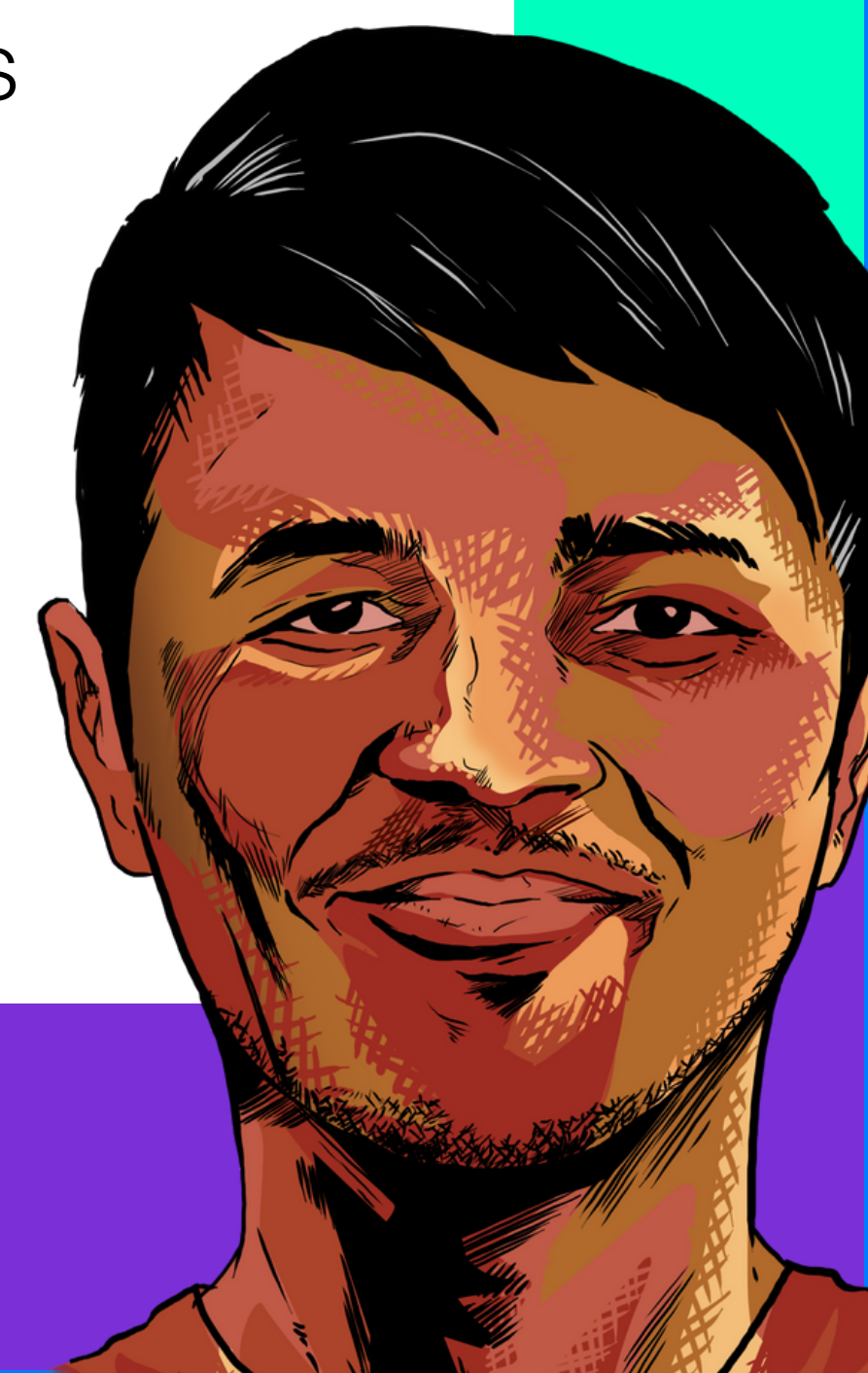
# ECPAT FRANCE PROTECT PROJECT

In 2021 RYS secured a three-year grant to localise the work it had been delivering in northern France since 2016, and subsequently granted it to ECPAT France. ECPAT's work is co-funded by Choose Love. Today, ECPAT operates a mobile team of professionals dedicated to safeguarding the rights and well-being of unaccompanied children on the move in Calais and the surrounding areas. Via street work and outreach they not only inform children of their rights but also facilitate referrals to state child protective services. A total of 476 children have been supported by the project since September 2021.

Operationally, the landscape was reshaped in 2023 by the opening of a new day centre for people on the move, operated by Médecins Sans Frontières. The centre is designated for unaccompanied children only on certain days of the week. This was a significantly positive development for UAM support in Calais, but also underscored the pressing need for a more coordinated response. Recognizing this, ECPAT emphasised the imperative of establishing a robust network that could holistically address the multifaceted challenges faced by UAMs and the organisations supporting them. ECPAT uses this new safe space to provide psychosocial activities for children on the move, allowing them to seek respite from their daily routines, build relationships with trusted adults, and build self-protective network with each other. Since the project began in September 2021, 51 activities of this nature have been delivered, attended 385 times.

In the realm of advocacy, ECPAT's engagements spanned a spectrum of political stakeholders. From dialogues with French MPs to interactions with the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe and esteemed figures like Lord Alf Dubs, ECPAT remained at the forefront of advocacy efforts. To date, ECPAT has meet with the local department responsible for child protection 13 times. ECPAT has also delivered 10 targeted advocacy actions including the press release regarding the reached capacity of child protection accommodation structures, and a public letter written by children themselves, regarding the living conditions at said structure.

ECPAT actively fostered collaborations, engaging with organizations across France and Belgium to exchange insights, best practices, and strategies. This collaborative ethos extended to capacity-building endeavours, workshops addressing the complexities of interactions with smugglers, and initiatives to bolster the expertise of the broader associative network. To date ECPAT has delivered 12 training, with 76 professionals trained.



# CONCLUSION

It has been a meaningful and successful year at Refugee Youth Service, despite the worsening anti-refugee rhetoric and hostile environment for refugees and asylum seekers in the UK. RYS has met and honoured each of its 2023 obligations, intentions and objectives, and looks optimistically towards 2024.

Despite undertaking and supporting work across Europe, RYS' identity is gradually transitioning to that of a British NGO. This is reflected in this annual report, which has offered a deep dive into RYS' flagship project *No Children in Hotels*. We have seen that the number of children erroneously classified as adults and isolated in Home Office hotels is alarming, and their living situations even worse than initially feared. However we have also seen that RYS' ability to bring hope and stability to their lives is profound, and confirms that the decision to focus time and resources on this particular issue was correct.

The project itself is unique and innovative, and is the first of its kind to go beyond county borders and connect the dots between age-disputed children, the communities they find themselves in, and the services they must access to improve their dire situations. The No Children in Hotels Project will therefore be the primary focus of RYS for 2024, as we attempt to raise and drive further resources towards the project and significantly increase the number of children we are able to support.

We are grateful to our supporters and partners, without which we would not be able to create this impact, and we look forward to deepening these relationships, as well as developing new ones, throughout 2024. Above all we continue to be inspired by and powered by the young people we exist to support. In truly dire circumstances they continue to show us that no challenge is insurmountable and there is no barrier that cannot be overcome!