

Breaking the Chains Project

Interim Evaluation
Report

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September 2020



Breaking the Chains is a partnership project run by the Migrant and Refugee Children's Legal Unit (MiCLU) at Islington Law Centre and Shpresa Programme, a registered charity and refugee community group working with the Albanian speaking community in London. Funded by the Paul Hamlyn Foundation, it is a 3-year project that started in March 2019. The overall objective of the project is to improve the legal representation of, and outcomes for, Albanian speaking children and young people in the UK asylum system.

The project aims to:

- Provide high quality legal advice and representation to Albanian speaking children and young people
- Develop and deliver the 'Immigration Champions' training programme (to increase engagement from hard-to-reach children and young people, ensure their voices inform the development and implementation of the *Breaking the Chains* project, and enable peer-to-peer dissemination of learning)
- Develop and deliver a 3-module training programme on the asylum system to Albanian speaking children and young people accessing Shpresa
- Provide advice sessions to children and young people at Shpresa concerned about their asylum claims
- Establish tailored programme for Shpresa staff on asylum-related legal issues
- Develop child/youth-friendly materials
- Share learning from the project via public events

The findings in this report relate to the first year of the project and are based on qualitative research conducted by the evaluator:

- Focus group discussion with 13 Immigration Champions
- Observation of 2 training sessions with young people from Shpresa
- Observation of 2 Immigration Champions training sessions
- Observation of 3 one-to-one advice sessions
- Interviews with 5 key members of staff from the *Breaking the Chains* project (from MiCLU and Shpresa)
- Interviews with 2 representatives of partner organisations
- Participation in dissemination events (University of York, June 2019)¹

It is the aim of this report to draw particularly on the voices of the young people, the *Breaking the Chains* staff team, as well as professionals working in partner organisations, to explore the achievements of the project in its first year as well as the challenges that the project faces.

¹ Attributions for quotations throughout the report are reflected through colour coding.

The report addresses the following topics:

A: Why the project is needed

1. Systematic discrimination of Albanian children and young people in the asylum system
2. Limited Possibilities of Albanian children and young people seeking asylum securing good quality legal representation.

B: The project's successes

1. Legal Representation
2. Immigration Champions Programme
3. Broader Training Programme
4. Child/Youth Centred Practice
5. Effective Partnership Working

C: Challenges remaining

1. Demand exceeds capacity
2. Adapting modes of working
3. Supporting the young people emotionally
4. Getting more high-quality legal practitioners on board
5. Changing the Narrative: challenging prejudicial attitudes towards Albanians

D: Building on the foundations of Year 1 – The response to Covid 19

E: Recommendations

A: Why the Project is needed

1. Systematic discrimination of Albanian children and young people in the asylum system

Albania is one of the highest applicant-producing countries of children seeking asylum in the UK (being consistently in the top six). It is also one of the top three source countries of children referred to the National Referral Mechanism as potential victims of trafficking.

In 2019 the US State Department's *Country Report on Human Rights Practices* in Albania pointed to '[s]ignificant human rights issues included restrictions on free expression and the press, including the existence of criminal libel laws, and pervasive corruption in all branches of government and municipal institutions'². Yet asylum decisions in the UK over and over again adduce that young people will be accorded the protection of the Albanian state if they are returned.³

Children and young people fleeing traffickers, blood feuds, honour-based violence and organised crime in Albania have historically had a disproportionately low chance of securing protection at first instance when seeking asylum in the UK. In 2015-16, for example, the initial grant rate was less than 0.5%. Moreover, unaccompanied asylum-seeking children from Albania are more likely to have their cases certified than unaccompanied asylum seeking young people of other any other nationality. Certification means that the asylum claim is characterised as being 'without foundation' and removes in-country rights of appeal against refusal. In 2016, of 229 unaccompanied children from Albania who received an initial decision on their asylum claim, only two were recognised as refugees, according to the 2017 Refugee Council report *Children in the Asylum System*. The year before, the figure was one⁴. Such statistical data points to systematic discrimination against Albanian children and young people in the UK asylum system⁵. Two leading immigration lawyers provided an explanation:

'I think it is fairly clear that this group of asylum seekers is a particularly vulnerable cohort in a lot of different ways. Leaving aside the question, for the moment, of fear of any persecution they have in Albania, the mere fact of the age that they are sent across Europe all the way to the UK on their own, away from their families. Even if there was no background of persecution or serious harm, that is cause for concern and places them in extremely vulnerable situations. I mean vulnerable to all kinds of abuse here, we see that in the high

² <https://www.state.gov/reports/2019-country-reports-on-human-rights-practices/albania/> (accessed 27 May 2020)

³ Rachel Alsop and Esme Madill (2019) 'Breaking the Chains; Albanian Children and Young People Seeking Asylum in the UK,' *Discover Society*

⁴ Esme Madill (2018) 'Home Office fails Albanian Refugees', *Open Democracy*, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/shine-a-light/albanian-blood-feuds-shpresa-asylum/> (accessed 20 May 2020)

⁵ David Neale (2020) 'Albanian Blood Feuds: An update' <https://www.gardencourtchambers.co.uk/news/albanian-blood-feuds-an-update> ; David Neale (2019) 'Albanian blood feuds and certification: a critical review' <https://www.gardencourtchambers.co.uk/news/albanian-blood-feuds-and-certification-a-critical-view> (accessed 20 May 2020)

levels of trafficking of these young Albanians. So they are an extremely vulnerable group due to their profiling of being young asylum seekers sent to the UK. If one adds to that the various persecutory fears they have, I mean that adds an additional level of vulnerability and leaves them without support or the possibility of getting support, or integration back into their own countries. But then a further level of vulnerability, I think, is the Home Office, also the tribunal, seem to be determined to deny protection to Albanians generally, and young Albanians in particular. It seems to me there are really powerful ideological and political factors behind that assessment, rather than it being a proper assessment of the needs of these young people. I think it is the idea, it is utterly unpalatable to the Home Office and the tribunal, that there should be a country in Europe that generates sustainable asylum claims, that persecutes young people, and they are doing everything in their powers to deny that possibility as a means to refuse asylum to young people.'

(Interview, May 2020)

'We, as lawyers, understood the strategic role of Albanian cases in the immigration and asylum system, that we had observed already that the government would use Albanian children's cases to try out things they wouldn't dare to suggest as a general approach to other children's cases. But this appeared to be acceptable if only targeted at specific groups. So, around information sharing with the Albanian government and the Bangladeshi government there was quite early work done by the Home Office to make contact with those governments and look at ways to remove Albanian children under the age of 18 and look at ways that information sharing between governments could be used to undermine children's claims basically. I think the willingness of the Albanian government to be involved in that sort of scheme was highly relevant and I think also perceptions in the sector about Albanian cases fed into it [...]. In Shpresa, they could see that Albanian children and young people were discriminated against in terms of access to justice. So it was particularly hard for them to get their cases taken on and they would quite often be seen by very poor lawyers who would do very little to take their cases forward. We saw from the other side that the Home Office was using specific characteristics about the Albanian state and also the prejudice against Albanian asylum applicants to try out, to use them as guinea pigs because they knew there wouldn't be an outcry for Albanian children in the way that there were for other children.'

(Interview, February 2020)

In the past year there has been an improvement in the rate of positive outcomes for young Albanians in the asylum system – 21 grants of protection in 2019, constituting a 9% success rate of young Albanians seeking asylum who secure protection in the first instance. It seems unlikely to be a coincidence that this improvement occurs alongside the work of the *Breaking*

the *Chains* project supported by leading barristers at Garden Court Chambers. Importantly, this work includes the dissemination of legal expertise and the sharing of good practice to the wider legal sector through an online 'Albanian Asylum Claims Toolkit'⁶, including a report on how to run an asylum case for young Albanians, dealing specifically with how to address certification, produced by MiCLU and Garden Court.⁷

2. Limited Possibilities of Albanian children and young people seeking asylum securing good quality legal representation.

Shpresa Programme excel in provision for children and young people in the London-based Albanian speaking community. The levels of commitment and support they show to the young people who engage with their services are exemplary⁸. It became evident in their work with children and young people that being able to secure high quality legal representation for the young people was rare. Thus, within an immigration system already pitted against them, Albanian children and young people's access to justice is further hampered by their chances of finding high quality legal support. As a member of staff at Shpresa explained:

'The quality of representation was minimum, and on the battle to find different lawyers we were faced with, good lawyers did not want to take Albanian cases. They were hard to win. There is not a straightforward case.'

(Interview, April 2020)

A recognition of the difficulties that young Albanians face in the asylum system was echoed across the interviews with legal representatives:

'They have got a massively uphill struggle in the first place because of the culture of disbelief, and the country information, the understanding of Albania that is shared by the Home Office and tribunal. So they have a real uphill struggle in making a good asylum claim, but in trying to make good their asylum claims they are assisted by - what is better described as further impeded - by really poor'

⁶ . <https://miclu.org/resources/albanian-asylum-claims-toolkit> (accessed 28 May 2020).

⁷ David Neale and Gurbinder Kaur Khanba (2019) *A practical response to the certification of Albanian cases* <https://miclu.org/assets/uploads/2019/06/A-practical-response-to-the-certification-of-Albanian-cases.pdf>

⁸ Shpresa Programme works with over 2,000 Albanian speaking refugees and migrants each year to foster integration and to support men, women and children, enabling them to contribute to the communities in which they now live and work. Shpresa holds the London Youth Quality Mark, Gold Award for excellence in their Youth Work provision. It was awarded the Forum for Health and Well Being's Communities of Health Award for the third year running in 2016 and in September 2018 achieved PQASSO level 2. In October 2016, Shpresa received the Marsh Award for its contribution to the fight against modern slavery, and for its work with trafficked women and children. The Albanian Supplementary School's Project has been awarded the Special Distinction Award from the NRCSE (National Resource Centre for Supplementary Education) for exceptional all-round high-quality education in teaching and learning; day to day management; and good governance. Furthermore, Luljeta Nuzi, the founder of Shpresa Programme, has received an Honorary Award as Migrant and Refugee Woman of the year in 2012 and a David Crystal Award from the Chartered Institute of Linguists in 2014 in recognition of her work with Shpresa Programme fostering the study of community languages.

quality legal representation. One feature of the poor quality of representation that they get is that frequently these solicitors, once there has been a bad decision, for example a decision to certify an asylum claim as clearly unfounded, or a decision to dismiss an appeal, then the lawyers will ditch the client, leaving them completely in the dark. They end up frequently as refused asylum seekers with no lawful basis for being here, in the increasingly hostile environment, and that situation is even more vulnerable to exploitation and abuse than [the situation they were in] beforehand.'

(Interview, May 2020)

'There is prejudice against Albanian asylum claimants, there's also an apathy. The cases are seen as really hard to win and the narrative we have for ourselves as lawyers - as an immigration solicitor you don't have to go out and look for work, it will always find you, so what you have to do is turn work down a lot. So you need a narrative for yourself about why you're taking one case rather than another. You feed into that deserving and underserving refugee stereotype, and I just think that [with] those Albanian cases that people didn't want to believe, what was happening to those children was really happening. It's much easier to say they're all economic migrants who feed you the same lie, rather than think 'Oh my God, a nation's children are leaving in droves and are telling similar stories, that's really indicative of child rights abuse on a grand scale in that country.' If you don't have the capacity to take on all of the cases and if they are particularly hard work then it's easier to tell yourself they are unmeritorious and that's why you're not taking them.'

(Interview, February 2020)

A key issue is that the structure of legal aid funding for asylum cases acts as a disincentive to lawyers to take on Albanian cases. In asylum cases, where the client is aged over 18, the lawyer only receives a fixed fee (£413 at the time of writing). The *Breaking the Chains* project has shown that to win an Albanian case you need to frontload the inclusion of country expert reports, trauma expert reports, psychiatric and other reports, to avoid cases being certified. This means that the cases are time and resource-intensive. If lawyers do three times the amount of work charged on the fixed-fee regime they can then charge an hourly rate, but there is a risk here; additional work may be done and due to auditing, will still result in payment to the lawyer of the significantly lower fixed fee. Moreover, the frontloading of reports means that these third-party costs also need to be frontloaded, and supporting those costs is not seen as financially viable by many private law firms.

Overall, the low rates of pay for legal aid work mean that lawyers have to take on a high number of cases in order to make the work pay sufficiently. As a result they are more inclined to take on less complicated cases where the need for international protection is more easily explained by international awareness of regional political or human rights abuses and there is a greater chance of success (for example to prioritise Syrian or Eritrean cases over Albanian ones).

As one interviewee explained:

'I think obviously there is a massive gap in how Albanian claims are being represented and I also just think that as they are particularly difficult to win. It does require particular specialisation on the side of the solicitor on how to manage those claims because what we noted is a lot of solicitors - who we would say are generally good and would be dealing quite well with other cases - when it comes to the Albanian ones they kind of reproduce the same way they have worked with other cases and that doesn't always work well. So solicitors who are really good with other claims still get a claim certified for an Albanian, because they have been waiting for a decision before getting further evidence because that is how legal aid usually works, that's how they work with other clients so I think Breaking the Chains has been great in really looking at what is happening with Albanian claims and specialising in how solicitors should be dealing with them because obviously it's one of the few nationalities of, at least, our young people who actually get certifications.'

(Interview, Refugee Organisation, April 2020)

The young people in the focus group spoke also of the frustrations resulting from previous encounters with poor legal representatives. Participating in the *Breaking the Chains* project had given them the confidence and knowledge to actively challenge lawyers when they felt their cases and those of others were not being handled competently:

'Before when we got a negative response we were just going to leave it, when the lawyer says you don't have any chances to do anything you just leave it but then now we have met [lawyer working with the Breaking the Chains project] we know what we have to do even if the lawyer's bad.'

'I asked my lawyer what I should do if I get a negative response and he said I don't know, just find a European woman and get married to her --- if you're Albanian and got really small chances, so the best way is to just get married to someone you love.'

'I went with a friend, and the solicitor was saying, 'I'm sorry but you know it's over, if you pay me we can do a JR, I don't think your case has a chance to be successful.' I say 'excuse me, can I add something.. I have been in training, and I hear if they accept the trafficking you are going to be successful in JR, and ... you just make a request, ok?' Result was that he did it and my friend was successful.'

'I know the difference now between a bad lawyer and a good one.'

'Without the knowledge which I get from the training I didn't know what is expert report, how I have to defend myself from Home Office, and now I have more knowledge how it works in the system. Even if I get refused I know the other steps which I need to take.'

(Focus Group, November 2019)

B: The project's successes

The *Breaking the Chains* project seeks to address the injustices that young Albanian people encounter in the asylum system through not only providing high quality legal representation to individual clients, but also by engendering widespread sectoral change in the ways in which Albanian cases are perceived and handled⁹. In achieving these aims, it seeks to place the young Albanian people involved in the project at the heart of its delivery, to ensure the lived experiences of the children and young people inform practices and decision-making at all levels of the project.

As the table below indicates, due to increasing awareness and need, the project exceeded most of its targets in Year One:

Target	Outcome
Casework Service MiCLU to offer a casework service to 15 children and young people, depending on nature of the cases	18 cases taken on (Target exceeded)
Immigration Champions Programme 6-8 Immigration Champions (see 2 below) to be co-trained by Shpresa and MiCLU to give a voice to, and advocate for, children and young people within the asylum system	17 Immigration Champions trained (Target exceeded)
Training Programme 3 training sessions on the asylum system covering: (i) an overview of the asylum system, (ii) how to get the best from your lawyer; and (iii) fresh claims, to be delivered by MiCLU at Shpresa, three times in the year (nine sessions in total during the year) to approximately 75 children and young people in total.	Term 1 Immigration Training delivered (Norwood Junction Youth Group): 1) Session i: 30/05/2019 2) Session ii: 06/06/2019 3) Session iii: 20/06/2019 Attendees: 43 (+10 Immigration Champions) Term 2 Immigration Training delivered (Forest Gate Youth Group): 1) Session i: 25/11/2019 2) Session ii: 2/12/2019 3) Session iii: 16/12/2019 Attendees: 32 (+10 Immigration Champions)

⁹ As already indicated, the improvement in the number of positive outcomes for Albanian cases (21 in 2019 <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistical-data-sets/asylum-and-resettlement-datasets#asylum-applications-decisions-and-resettlement> compared to just two in 2016, for example - Esme Madill (2018) 'Home Office fails Albanian Refugees', *Open Democracy*, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/shine-a-light/albanian-blood-feuds-shpresa-asylum/> (accessed 20 May 2020) illustrates already the sectoral impact of the work of the Breaking the Chains project in collaboration with Garden Court Barrister Chambers.

	<p>Term 3 Immigration Training delivered (Norwood Junction Youth Group): –</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Session i: 13/02/2020 2) Session ii: 20/02/2020 3) Session iii: 27/02/2020 <p>47 attendees (+ 10 Immigration Champions)</p> <p>In addition to the Immigration Training above, MiCLU delivered training to a new cohort of 10 Immigration Champions which the previous year's cohort of Immigration Champions co-delivered at Forest Gate Youth Group:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) 15/07/2019 2) 29/07/2019 3) 05/08/2019 <p>(Target exceeded)</p>
<p>Advice Surgeries</p> <p>18 surgery sessions (two half-hour sessions to be available after each of the nine training sessions) to be delivered by MiCLU, to children and young people at Shpresa who are worried about their asylum claims, in order to provide information and to signpost</p>	<p>Term 1: 7 surgery sessions delivered</p> <p>Term 2: 8 surgery sessions delivered</p> <p>Term 3: 13 surgery sessions delivered</p> <p>(Target exceeded)</p>
<p>Develop child-friendly resources</p> <p>Child friendly precedents to be developed by MiCLU</p>	<p>Initial advice letter – done and in use with all new clients to the <i>Breaking the Chains</i> project, and other child clients at MiCLU/ILC.</p> <p>Leaflets about asylum appeal hearings, and after the hearing – not yet finalised but are in use for piloting purposes.</p> <p>Consultation with young people on other leaflets required.</p> <p>Additionally the Immigration Champions themselves have become a resource in the provision of peer-to-peer Children Friendly information.</p>
<p>Public Events</p> <p>One public event to be co-facilitated by MiCLU, and children and young people</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Breaking the Chains</i> Project Launch – 25 April 2019 (Houses of Parliament, London)

<p>from Shpresa, to share the learning from this project</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No right of appeal: the mass certification of Albanian asylum claims – 19 June 2019 (Garden Court Chambers, London) • Immigration Law Practitioner's Association (ILPA)'s inaugural children's rights conference – 18 September 2019, • Child Rights Alliance England (CRAE) conference celebrating 30 years of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child - 7 November 2019 • Improving the experience of Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children conference arranged by the London Borough of Islington – 21st November 2019 • Albanian Flag Day – 30 November 2019 • Our Lives in Your Hands - Friday 6 March 2020 6-8pm @ Islington Law Centre <p>(Target exceeded)</p>
<p>Develop policy and awareness MiCLU and Shpresa to identify key policy issues affecting Albanian children and young people and to begin to identify how this project can raise awareness of, and where appropriate address, these issues.</p>	<p>A research meeting was held on 14 November 2019 at Garden Court Chambers where a group of Immigration Champions assisted a team of academics from the University of York, UCL and LSE in identifying the gaps in the evidence base regarding the situation facing young Albanians at risk in Albania.</p> <p>A strategic meeting took place on 3 December 2019 at Garden Court Chambers whereby a group of Immigration Champions attended with MiCLU and met a team of barristers to discuss what strategic litigation is and the types of cases that could potentially come within scope as a test case/country guidance case, or a challenge to Home Office policy/procedure.</p> <p>The poor quality of representation received by many of the young people involved with the <i>Breaking the Chains</i> project has led to MiCLU establishing a working group of</p>

	<p>professionals from across the sector (including children's charities, local authorities and lawyers) which meets quarterly to discuss how to respond on a strategic level, and the development of resources to facilitate children and young people's understanding of this issue.</p> <p>MiCLU has been working with the London Borough of Islington (LBI) around specific concerns about the exploitation of Albanian children and young people by individuals connected with legal representatives. This has included meeting with the National Crime Agency (NCA) on 14th January 2020 to share concerns and support a way forward. This work is ongoing.</p> <p>MiCLU and Garden Court Chambers prepared a written paper on the certification of the asylum claims of Albanian nationals in June 2019 ahead of the conference No right of appeal: the mass certification of Albanian asylum claims – 19 June 2019 at Garden Court Chambers, in response to the surge in claims being refused without an in-country right of appeal: https://miclu.org/resources/albanian-asylum-claims-toolkit</p> <p>MiCLU prepared a resource document ahead of the conference No right of appeal: the mass certification of Albanian asylum claims – 19 June 2019 on the practical issues faced by lawyers working on Albanian asylum claims and providing advice on how to front-load asylum claims to try and prevent certification of claims. This is publicly available as part of MiCLU's toolkit on Albanian asylum claims: https://miclu.org/resources/albanian-asylum-claims-toolkit</p>
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1. Legal Representation

The work of the specialist and dedicated team leading the *Breaking the Chains* project has already shown in the first year of the *Breaking the Chains* project that **Albanian asylum cases CAN succeed**, even in the hostile environment which young Albanians seeking asylum find themselves. In the first year of the project, MiCLU has taken on 18 cases, exceeding the project target of 15.

'It is extremely impressive work that they do [...] I mean they, the casework they do, is first class. I think that is partially down to how good [they] are as lawyers.'

(Interview, May 2020)

'It goes to show that the care they provide is really impressive and the representation that comes out of it is a great success. Every time that they take on one of my cases it is such a relief [...] It is really hard to just look at the success rate as they are hard cases to win, obviously it's about getting young people status but it is also about making sure that the young person has the best chance they can. Not everyone will win, but it is about making the best case because what is really painful is when you see young people who do not manage to get status but also that their cases have been prepared half way with sloppiness and on those occasions you feel like it could have been different may be. But knowing with the specific legal knowledge and a specific legal strategy and a lot of passion and a lot of care has been prepared in their case and does put forward the best case possible.'

(Interview, April 2020)

The 2020 Independent Peer Review of Islington Law Centre's work on asylum and immigration (of which MiCLU forms part) praised the Centre for its

*'willingness to take on very difficult cases and, through a combination of hard work, attention to detail and refusal to be daunted by what to anyone else may appear to be insurmountable legal or practical obstacles, achieve remarkable outcomes for their clients.'*¹⁰

2. Immigration Champions Programme

Immigration Champions are young Albanians who individually are service users at Shpresa and who together form a core group of young people at the heart of the project. The programme has been set up to increase the engagement of particularly vulnerable and hard-to-reach young people, to increase their confidence and their knowledge of the asylum system, to ensure that their lived experiences inform the development of the project, and to

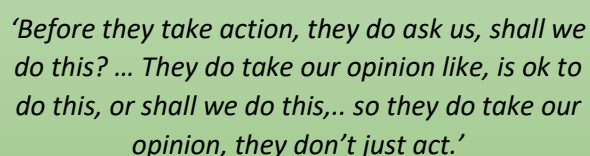
¹⁰ Legal Aid Agency Independent Peer Review Report of Islington Law Centre (Immigration and Asylum Category) – May 2020

more broadly raise awareness of the particular issues facing young Albanian people in the UK asylum system. Immigration Champions play a pivotal role in peer-to-peer training and the training of professionals engaged in the immigration system (for example, legal representatives, social workers, foster carers, local authorities and youth workers), they also closely support paid staff on the *Breaking the Chains* team to develop and deliver the programme's key objectives. So far 17 young people have been trained as Immigration Champions: 12 young men and 5 young women¹¹.

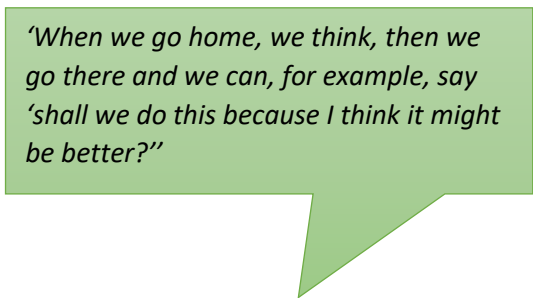
To summarise, Immigration Champions:

- Deliver training to lawyers, social workers, teachers and other professionals
- Provide and facilitate training for children and young people accessing Shpresa's services
- Participate in conferences and information events on specific issues affecting Albanian children and young people and asylum-seeking children and young people
- Participate in conferences and information events on issues affecting all asylum seeking children and young people
- Develop child-friendly training and materials, including online materials
- Exchange ideas with other children and young people to share learning across communities

The Immigration Champions are the 'jewel in the crown' of the *Breaking the Chains* project. In observations of their training and the delivery of presentations and training sessions, the young people's commitment and diligence, and their effectiveness in relating their experiences of being a young Albanian asylum seeker in the UK are impactful and impressive. They also play a pivotal role in ensuring that information from the project is made accessible in a child/youth friendly manner not only to their Albanian peers but also to other children and young people in the asylum system through their participation in external events. In the focus group, the young people shared that they felt their views were taken seriously and that they felt at ease to provide feedback to the *Breaking the Chains* team.



'Before they take action, they do ask us, shall we do this? ... They do take our opinion like, is ok to do this, or shall we do this,.. so they do take our opinion, they don't just act.'



'When we go home, we think, then we go there and we can, for example, say 'shall we do this because I think it might be better?''

(Focus Group, November 2019)

In terms of the training of the Immigration Champions, staff from MiCLU and Shpresa work productively together to ensure that all participants are valued, encouraged and involved at a pace that is appropriate to them. Staff are highly receptive to the young people's ideas on

¹¹ Around 90 per cent of Albanian speaking young people in the asylum system are male. The over-representation of young women amongst the Immigration Champions is to ensure that the programme remains sensitive to the needs of both young women and young men.

how best to share their experiences of the legal system and work supportively to develop and encourage their ideas. As is standard across all training with young people within the *Breaking the Chains* project, sessions with the Immigration Champions always start with a discussion of the ground rules of participation to promote a spirit of mutual respect and trust. At the end of the sessions, each young person is individually thanked for their particular participation. Such dedication to the feelings and contribution of each individual is to be highly commended. The young people are given the space and the confidence to tell their stories on their terms.

'I think the biggest lesson we've learnt is how... what capacity those kids have to make change in their own lives and to be part of change. I wouldn't have said I was someone before who had a patronising view of children and young people, but they've astounded me with their ability to deliver training, to understand concepts, to make suggestions, to think creatively. Everything. They have added so much to the way that we think and the way that we do our work,'

(Interview, February 2020)

'I'd say they are probably the biggest success that we've had so far. Just in terms of how willing they are to go out there in front of anybody. I mean the ILPA conference, the children's conference in September, they were just amazing. In front of everyone like employers, social workers, you know people from different NGOs. It was just amazing. They just went up there and did what they had rehearsed and it was just so effective. I personally think that them being at an event is more powerful than anything we could say. I know that we have to be there with them, I know we have to do the legal bit and all the rest of it, but I think when they are leading I just think it's different. People don't expect that, it's so different from any training that you go to. It comes as a shock to the people who sit in the audience, but also you hear from their mouths the way that they've been treated and the things that they are going through. It just makes them realise that these people are human, and that's what people forget because you're working on files and you don't necessarily see the client.'

(Interview, February 2020)

'We give them opportunities to speak to professionals in a setting where they are taken seriously and their experience and their ideas shape what you do next. They like really shape it, don't just provide an echo chamber for what we think we are going to do. They change what we are going to do if it's not what's actually necessary.'

(Interview February 2020)

'I think that the training of the Immigration Champions and their ability and willingness to attend events and their skills in telling their stories and explaining what it is like to be them has been really important. It's starting to make change.'

(Interview, February 2020)

The Immigration Champions themselves tell of the life-changing impact participation has had on their lives, and their pride in being able to share their knowledge with others, to make impactful change in the lives of other young Albanians, and in the legal system more broadly.

'We have all the information we need plus we share it with others, we go to youth clubs and there are people there [who] don't understand nothing, we try to explain it to them how the system works, your rights, something that we didn't get when we first came.'

'We started late, when we came here we knew nothing about this, for the new ones who are coming after us, we are trying to train them before they have all these problems.'

'We learn how the system works, get all the information we need. If that was explained when we first got here it would have been so much different, it would have been so much easier for us.'

'I learn more, I share more, the new guys don't know yet anything, some have been here for a long time - 3 years - and stuff but still don't know what happens, we can communicate with them, share with them.'

'Everything we are doing now is may be not going to help us, but for the other people who is coming after us, it is good to help them.'

(Focus Group, November 2019)

The creative use of role play in the delivery of the Immigration Champions' presentations to professionals has been especially effective in relaying some of the difficulties the young people have working with their legal representatives. The Immigration Champions noted:

'In a better way you can look him in the eye, try to understand him.'

'On 'training with solicitors' [role play] we show it to them, to try to explain how that makes the young person feel, how can that be better, have more eye communication, better body language.'

(Focus Group, November 2019).

The success of the role playing was echoed by the professionals:

'What we did there was to run some role plays with the lawyers playing the part of the client and the Immigration Champions playing the part of the lawyers. The Immigration Champions did some role plays of them playing both parts and then we invited the lawyers to comment on what the issues were, or what they'd observed. They got that, they understood what the right answer was. Then we asked them to do role plays where the solicitors were the child client and the Immigration Champions were the solicitors. We, beforehand, agreed with the Immigration Champions that they would only speak Albanian in that part and they absolutely wouldn't provide any English. So they just talked Albanian and got more kind of terse saying, you know 'Come on then'. It was incredible to see how shaken all of those lawyers were, given that their whole days were spent talking to people who had no ability to communicate directly. It was really shocking to me that it was shocking to them, but it absolutely was. It threw them completely and it really came home to me about how little thought people were giving to the positions of their clients.'

(Interview, February 2020)

'One of the women came up to me at the end of the group and was saying 'Oh my God that was the most amazing training I've been on'. She was a social worker, she was saying 'If only I could've got my whole team to hear what they just said.'

(Interview, February 2020)

3. Broader Training Programme

In observing the module training with young people from Shpresa, it was evident that the Immigration Champions play a central role in supporting the delivery of information by the lawyers running the session. They are instrumental in keeping the group focused, translating where necessary, and further explaining concepts, ideas and processes in ways accessible to their peers.

The training sessions enable the *Breaking the Chains* team to deliver crucial information on how to understand and navigate the asylum process. Quite complex information is conveyed to the young people over three two-hour sessions per term through a process of interactive learning (supported by information packs for all participants to take away). The Immigration Champions are an indispensable part of this training, and are able to share their own experiences and understandings of the legal processes within the sessions, and act as role-

models to the larger group. The sessions are well attended and enable the project to reach considerably more young people than they are able to represent in casework.

'And we wanted to train the young people so they can be able to digest the information they get and can put it into language to their peers in the group. If we manage to get the young people trained and say 'yes we trust a lawyer, yes we know how to behave, yes we know when it is not right', then people will do one of the two things – they will care and understand if their lawyer is not good, so they ask more questions, or they want to go for a better lawyer. And if they go for a better lawyer they know they will need to be in charge, if they are not in charge then they will not be able to win their case. Then we started to have a relationship with the barristers, they know it is important one as well. Unless we had the feedback from them it was really difficult to get other lawyers to represent the young people. This is where we are now. Lots of resources have been prepared, we have barristers and lawyers working together, and charity organisations working in a way where we can't please each other all of the time but there is an understanding that everyone needs to be helped and we need to make it work.'

(Interview, April 2020)

'Part of the reason that we run the training and the information sessions and the advice sessions surgery session is to maximise the number of young people who can benefit from some aspect of what we do. So that they can get information about the asylum process, about how to work with your solicitor, to try and keep those that are in a holding pattern from a) giving up hope, and b) being dragged too far off the course that they need to be on in the hope that we would be able to take them on, to protect them from the poor representatives that are out there and to create in all of them a better understanding that they share and pass on.'

(Interview, February 2020)

'It's not perfect, it's not the same as being represented by the project, but it does have some elements of protection and that's why I think it's really important that that's understood. It's a deliberate strategy to meet our understanding that we can't see - that we can't take on - everyone that we would like to take on, but we need to offer them something in the meantime to try and not let them completely slip off the radar.'

(Interview, February 2020)

Crucially, the Immigration Champions are also involved in disseminating knowledge beyond the sessions through other informal networks, and therefore to Albanian and other peers who are not engaged with Shpresa and who are particularly hard to reach. As one Immigration Champion explained:

'There are friends that don't come to the training – and they [are] saying what's next? The information I get there [at training] when I'm with friends, I can tell them what they need to do.'

(Focus Group, November 2019)

This ability to impact beyond those who are directly involved in the training was also observed by the lawyers involved:

'X is always bringing people in and saying 'It's an Albanian case and they haven't even got a country expert, what are we going to do?' [laughs]. They know what they're doing now, far better than some lawyer. They are utterly extraordinary, [an] extraordinary group of young people who take it so seriously.'

(Interview, February 2020)

'All the training, which is just as important, we've seen things happen as a result of that. We've had one young person who has actually been speaking to his friend and in conversation has realised his friend had a certified refusal, so said he needed to get legal advice on this ASAP.'

(Interview, February 2020)

4. Child/Youth Centred Practice

Throughout the project the ethos of child-centred learning informs practice. The integration of the Immigration Champions into the planning and delivery of the services illustrates the ways both MiCLU and Shpresa seek to amplify the voices of the Albanian children and young people in the core practice of the project. It ensures that the lived experiences of the young people, their concerns and their ideas, shape practice every step of the way. During the legal training-sessions the lawyers listen to the feedback from the young people and adapt their own delivery of training accordingly, to maximise its accessibility and reach.

This model of child-centred practice contrasts with the experiences of the young people elsewhere in the legal system. They recount numerous experiences of legal representatives who have not listened to them or given them the time and space to build up the trust to share their stories; of being fobbed off with shoddy legal practice; of daunting and bewildering encounters with Home Office representatives; or of intimidating court hearings where judges have been dismissive and curt.

'Even the interpreters they pressure you, not all of them, just saying some of them.'

'They pressure you, to say something, and even if you don't know something the way they speak to you, the way they pressure you, you just guess something out of nowhere, it's something you don't know, but the way they ask you, you have to give them something or you'll get in trouble, now I know I have my rights to say I don't know, say if they ask me for example for a date, I don't know the date, I can't remember, and he asks me and I'll just be like, this month, this day, I'm just guessing because I think I'm going to get in trouble.'

(Focus Group, November 2019)

These stories build up a picture of a broader legal system that fails to see and treat children as children, and routinely violates the rights of children and young people. Consistently the young people ask that immigration judges should be better trained to deal appropriately with the children and young people they encounter. As one Immigration Champion explained:

'There might be a lot of people in there, and then the Home Office asks the young person a really, really personal question in front of everyone, and we want the judge to understand that the Home office can't just ask them like that, ok they can ask us questions, but not like in front of everyone, we want to have our rights as well in there, if the judge understands it, he'll be like, 'hold on, you can't just ask a question like that to a young person,' ...

My friend right, the Home Office was asking him such a personal question, sometimes you can't just hold it and he got mad and then he started shouting, and he closed the case just because of that ... when someone asks you really, really personal questions, you don't want to talk about it, especially in front of everyone ... so if a judge knows us and understands us, he'll be like 'Hold on wait for your turn... we want them to treat us like other young people.'

'You think it's easy to talk about stuff to them in front of everyone?'

(Focus Group, November 2019)

Their concerns are echoed by the legal professionals interviewed:

'Although we have had a few successful outcomes, we've seen that some of the judges are really set in their way in how they approach an Albanian case.'

(Interview, February 2020)

Moreover, the difficulties of securing child-friendly practices in court hearings were also acknowledged by the legal representatives involved in cases:

'Especially when it comes to issues of a vulnerable witness. I've done other cases where we have asked for guidance to be applied in that case and asked for them to be treated as a vulnerable witness. Some of them are really good at it, they'll stop the Home Office if they are asking certain questions. Some of them will play lip-service to it and say 'yes that applies, of course we will treat your client as a vulnerable witness', and then they don't interject. Then you have to interject and then the hearing runs as it would if it was... I don't know, somebody who was not vulnerable in that sense. It's hard to say because every asylum seeker is vulnerable, obviously if you have medical evidence then you have things to show why.'

(Interview, February 2020)

The *Breaking the Chains* project offers a holistic model of working which supports and underpins the child-centred ethos of its approach. As lawyers in the project work with young people beyond their individual case work, alongside them in training for example, they build up a broader, more in-depth understanding of the young people, and, vitally, build opportunities to develop trust in them. As one of the legal team explained:

'Also [for young people] being able to see the lawyers outside of the office - there is often something that is missing when you only see your lawyer when you have to talk about your case, and instead, having that relationship where you meet them also when you are preparing workshops ... it creates a relationship that is a lot more personal - not beyond the boundaries that need to be there, but, like, a lot is asked of these young people to tell you their stories and to trust you, but often not much is given back on a personal level.'

(Interview, February 2020)

The *Breaking the Chains* project therefore demands a collaborative way of working that **foregrounds** the needs and rights of the young people:

'We have to train the lawyers, so they fight for us. We want them to understand it so when they understand it they fight for us.'

(Focus Group, November 2019)

5. Effective Partnership Working

Integral to the success of the *Breaking the Chains* project in the first year has been a good working relationship between the two key partner organisations: MiCLU and Shpresa Programme. Shpresa is experienced in working with young Albanian people, providing youth services and building trust through their care, compassion and commitment. Crucially, one of the MiCLU team members also has many years' experience working with Shpresa and is able to act as a bridge between the two organisations in terms of building and consolidating their working relationship:

'The people involved in Shpresa are quite astonishing people, and I think that needs to be valued and understood so that the extent to which things are replicable [can be understood]. You need the kind of foundation that Shpresa has, and it's the ability to hold those young people, and value them, and support them, and be trusted. We have only hit the ground running in the way that we have because of all the time [the MiCLU lawyer] has spent with Shpresa before and the fact we were able to, quite quickly, transfer the trust that the young people have in Shpresa over to us because she was familiar and very much trusted.'

(Interview , May 2020)

'One of the massive benefits of the partnership is when they come to it there is already an element of trust and that comes from [the Shpresa team]. I think that is a massive positive really. I do think that if this was a completely new partnership we probably would've struggled.'

(Interview, February 2020)

'You have to build that relationship, whereas she has already brought a pre-existing relationship to us. By that time she has developed a relationship with the Law Centre through her training and all of that. She gets it from both sides, and it makes it so much easier.'

(Interview, February 2020)

Effective partnership working extends beyond the relationship between MiCLU and Shpresa. One of the strengths of the project is its commitment and ability to build up partnerships with other organisations whose involvement and expertise are crucial to securing better outcomes for young Albanians in the asylum system:

'In that context I think Shpresa and Breaking the Chains provide a really critical service, a really critical form of support. At least some sort of glimmer of hope for these young asylum seekers. It is extremely impressive work that they do, both Shpresa and Breaking the Chains [...] I mean one feature of the way that they work is they have built very close working relationships with a whole lot of other professionals that may be becoming involved with these young people. People like me and colleagues at Garden Court that are very closely involved in

the work in relation to this cohort. It is different to the relationship everyone has [...] more ordinarily with solicitors in private practice, where the relationship normally, generally speaking it doesn't stray beyond the framework of an individual case or an individual set of instructions. You would have a working relationship with the solicitor in the course of preparing and representing on a particular case [...]. Of course, one has that [...] sort of typical solicitor/barrister relationship, but because of the nature of the project the relationship goes beyond that I think. It does extend to, for example, our attendance at meetings with Shpresa and the Immigration Champions, and them coming to chambers and having various meetings in chambers. I think it gets us, and when I say 'us,' I mean barristers, it gets us more involved in the issues facing these young people and finding solutions to them. We are more readily available to be instructed in particular cases and to provide advice and what support we can.'

(Interview, May 2020)

Partnership working with a range of relevant agencies enables the *Breaking the Chains* team to develop its strategic objective of achieving change in the ways in which Albanian cases are perceived and handled at a broader sectoral and social level. This has so far focused on building up working relations with a range of partners including barrister chambers, academics working in fields related to children and migration, therapists, politicians, and policy makers.

Importantly, the project has also secured good working relations with refugee organisations. As one case worker illustrates:

'Breaking the Chains in particular has been really helpful in regard to discussing the legal side of the Albanian young people we are supporting. It works both ways - we have been providing some extra support to some young people who were already engaged with Shpresa and Breaking the Chains and we have been trying to refer to Breaking the Chains when we have needed support with some young people.'

(Interview, April 2020)

In terms of working with legal practitioners, the project has not only provided training but also worked with partners to make resources available online. As one lawyer explains:

'Shpresa and Breaking the Chains have performed a really important educational function in relation to other legal practitioners. So, by example, they've encouraged a lot of people to take on cases that they otherwise wouldn't have. A lot of the institutional relationships and expertise that Shpresa and Breaking the Chains have made available to themselves is also there to be drawn upon by solicitors. It is very much the work that Breaking the Chains has done which has laid the foundation for that.'

(Interview, May 2020)

Additionally, the team seeks to develop collaborative research networks with academics working in related fields:

'Another feature, if they are thinking strategically about... not just about how to win individual cases, but how to deal with the legal problems provided by this particular group is... thinking, for example, about what kind of evidence might be obtained and how better to get country evidence to address the issues in these cases. So there is relationships with academics, and I think academics in the UK and Albania trying to establish relationships between the UK and Albania as means of obtaining information, obtaining evidence, obtaining understanding and analysis of issues on individual cases, and the issues that affect these places generally. I think they thought very constructively and very hard about what kind of evidence needs to be got and how it might be got . Again, they've very successfully drawn a lot of these people into shared understanding of the importance of what is at stake, and motivated these people to use their skills to try to address these issues through the way they've been made... they've been drawn into the whole Breaking the Chains, Shpresa, Immigration Champions nexus, I think it is a very powerful nexus for focusing people's attentions, interests, and commitment.'

(Interview, May 2020)

C: Challenges Remaining

1. Demand exceeds capacity

A key challenge for the project is that demand for good legal representation amongst the young people far outstrips the capacity of MiCLU to take on cases. With just one case worker during the first year, and the focus on providing high quality legal representation, difficult decisions have to be made as to which of the young people at Shpresa are offered legal representation by MiCLU and which are not.

'Balancing the desire we have to take on all of those young people's cases because they are all equally deserving and the knowledge that we can't. In the long term it's not going to achieve what we need this project to achieve, that's the challenge.'

(Interview, February 2020)

'I think the obvious issue is our ability to meet demand. There are just so many children and young people who are engaged in Shpresa, who are receiving inadequate or no legal advice. However many kids we take on, there immediately are more that need representation just as desperately. So, I think capacity to take on and run the cases the way they need to be run is an issue because the whole purpose of this project is to provide high quality advice that secures the right outcome. We therefore have to be quite hard-line about how

many cases we take on, because we can dilute the USP. There is no point in us taking on cases and not running them properly, because that is what we are trying to counteract.'

(Interview, February 2020)

'I think this is just a lot for one person, I'll be honest with you. Although, we make it as manageable for me as it can be in terms of numbers of cases and training is not every week – it's three terms, it's not mass take-over on your weekly work or whatever else. [But] It is still a lot for one person, so I think there needs to be expansions in the project. I know we are only one year in, it's just because [of] the numbers of people we see that need that help, we are obviously struggling to get people out there to take people to take cases on. So I think we need to add the expansion to it. I think we need another case worker and assistance with the training.'

(Interview, February 2020)

It is welcome that an additional full-time case worker funded by the Big Lottery has been appointed, building on the ongoing *Breaking the Chains* funding from Paul Hamlyn and the success of the project thus far.

'So I think the difficulty was [for] some of the previous Immigration Champions that they might need support, but they can wait so their case is not urgent enough. It felt like an accident and emergency. Some young people that were an accident and emergency we needed to act quick because it was their last chance to be saved. But then that left the people that we know will go to accident and emergency - but we can't wait for that to happen. We had a number of discussions about that, and we said we would deal with it when it comes to that, but it's hard: when you know that this will happen at some point and you haven't acted on it. That is one of the things we had to manage. What has helped us, though, is we know that on this project both the institutions want the best for these young people. We weren't prepared to leave anyone behind, but we had to mature and prepare for it and grow and say 'We will wait for it when it comes.'

(Interview, April 2020)

However, the broader training programme and the one-to-one advice sessions do have an impact in addressing some of these challenges of limited capacity. Through the training sessions, some of the young people are empowered with the knowledge and confidence to challenge their legal representatives to work more effectively on their cases.

'Sometimes it is hard to prioritise them, sometimes it is based on urgency [...] If we do well in three or five cases and we win those cases, we can share with other solicitors firms how to run the case and how to do it. Hopefully, wherever the young people are, they are going to go to the solicitors and say 'I need an expert

report' or 'I need this or this.' The same thing happened with one of our young people, he had a very poor firm of solicitors, but because he was coming to all our Immigration Champion meetings, he was going back and asking her on certain points. The solicitor asked 'How do you know this, have you paid a private solicitor now?' and he explained how he was a part of this group. The solicitor was a bit concerned, how did he know to ask these things? She thinks, 'I know you last year and you are nothing like compared to this year.' He won the case.'

(Interview, April 2020)

Demand for good legal representation amongst Albanian speaking young people extends beyond those engaged in the Shpresa Programme. Thinking through how to reach those young Albanian-speaking people not currently involved with the Shpresa Programme remains a challenge.

'Part of the model of how it has been working now, the young people have to engage with Shpresa to be referred to the solicitors and there is something else to be thought about there because some of the most vulnerable might not be able to engage with youth activities so I think there is a slight issue there in terms of how to access the most vulnerable this way, so a lot of the boys that really, really need, we try to tell them go to Shpresa, go to Shpresa, to the youth club but they just can't manage to [...] so [they are] therefore excluded from the contact with the brilliant lawyers.'

(Interview, April 2020)

Breaking the Chains is a partnership project and Shpresa's participation is key in taking care of the broader, long-term welfare needs of the young people involved. Such is the length of time young people are kept waiting in the asylum system, Shpresa plays a pivotal role in providing support and care for extended periods of the young people's lives. The young people and professionals tell of how waiting for two years for an initial decision is quite usual, but it can be up to four years.

2. Adapting modes of working

Across the interviews it was clear that the *Breaking the Chains* project requires the adaptation of existing and established ways of working for the legal practitioners. To meet the objective of 'delivering with' rather than 'delivering to,' the lawyer/client relationship is necessarily reshaped. Such new ways of working demand not only a considerable time commitment from all involved, but also a more holistic approach to working with clients. It requires working relationships that extend beyond the individual client/lawyer relationship, for example working alongside clients to co-deliver training, or working with large groups of young people in training sessions.

'This is difficult work to do and you need to be quite boundaried about it, and I think having the client solicitor relationship, then the 'we are colleagues on this

bit' relationship is quite challenging to my feeling of where I need my boundaries for me.'

(Interview, February 2020)

While challenging, 'working with' rather than 'working for' is crucial in ensuring that the lived experiences of the young people inform practices within the project.

For Shpresa too, engagement in the project requires substantial time commitment that extends beyond the allotted paid hours for the project. While the project is focused on securing better legal outcomes, the immigration needs of the young people cannot be disentangled from other aspects of their lives or other support needs:

'Regarding the time for staff, is still now... although I am working constantly, sometimes more than three days, this project is taking [the Director's] time a lot to support me. Ok it is something new, but the project is very much time consuming. Even just to have the one-to-ones, you have to have the one-to-ones with them a lot and prepare a work letter. You have to bear with them all the time. They have phone calls, their worries, their issues. It is not just working with them on immigration methods, you support them on mental health, social services, they don't have money. Sometimes you have to get involved in their personal life, you can see maybe something happened to the group and it is affecting them a lot, so they can cannot sleep and they cannot put themselves together. Even the project is to support with immigration matters, and the reason that they trust us a lot is because we are not saying 'Ok what is the problem with your solicitor?' etc., we are supporting them as a whole and by having this holistic support it is taking lots of time.'

(Interview, April 2020)

And, as indicated above, Shpresa has to hold and care for the young people for lengthy periods of time while their cases are run¹². As one of the team members explains:

'To say we support them only to become Immigration Champion is not true, you need to support them as whole with all other aspects. Then the trust you form comes [...] So we can accompany young people. We know what is best for them, someone to go with them and have interviews with their lawyer, go with them when they need to register in the school, to go with them when they are in hospital. That is what they value most, so now we say where can we go to get

¹² The Children's Society is campaigning for unaccompanied young people in the asylum system in England and Wales to have a guardian in place, as is the case currently in Scotland (<https://www.childrenssociety.org.uk/guardians/blog/musas-story-a-guardian-would-change-everything> accessed 17th July 2020). In Scotland there is a pilot Guardianship project in place which supports young people seeking asylum by placing with them an independent advocate who supports them through the asylum process (<https://www.scottishrefugeecouncil.org.uk/guardianship-scheme-helps-lone-young-asylum-seekers-rebuild-their-lives-in-scotland/> accessed 17th July 2020)

that extra capacity, to let someone extra into our team and hold those relationships and be with the young people where they want to be.'

(Interview, April 2020)

3. Supporting the young people emotionally

The Immigration Champions have formed a tight-knit group and they offer each other a great deal of support. While this is a strength of the group, the *Breaking the Chains* staff are mindful that this can take a huge emotional toll on the young people especially during times of crisis, for example, if one has a claim refused, becomes homeless or is depressed or suicidal.

'It's also difficult because you have this group of people who are very supportive and close to each other and know what's happening in each other's cases, so if you have a poor result it doesn't just effect one of your clients, it effects all of their friends. That can be very emotional. You then have a lot of your client group experiencing a low at the same time.'

(Interview, February 2020)

'I think it would've been useful to start this project as a three-way partnership with a therapeutic organisation. I think that could've provided some support for some clients, in terms of us having really strong referral routes if we were seeing distress build in this group of young people. That they could have some sort of therapeutic intervention, as a group or individually.'

(Interview, February 2020)

4. Getting more high-quality legal practitioners on board

A key objective of the project is to get more good quality law firms to take on Albanian cases. Feedback from training sessions for legal practitioners is overwhelmingly positive but translating that positive engagement into a substantial increase in firms taking on cases remains a challenge.

'It is an ongoing topic of conversation, how do we draw people in? I just think the young people, like the Immigration Champions, are so powerful when they speak, they are really moving. I think people are really touched when they hear from them, but it's just how do we then go from that to the next bit?'

(Interview, February 2020)

As indicated previously, even good private firms hesitate to take on Albanian cases because of issues of legal aid, as detailed above, alongside the amount of work needed to provide good representation, and the subsequent delays, and problems with cash flow.

'I think there is still quite long way to go. You go to events like the ones at Garden Court Chambers or specifically Breaking the Chains discussing all of this and I think it really helpful they have worked very closely with Garden Court Chambers, they have been preparing papers on certification, on blood feuds and that has all been really helpful to pass on to other solicitors. I think there is still a tendency to think that legal aid won't grant money, so there is still a bit more work to be done. Partially, the problem is that people who do attend events are already people who are quite good and want to go the extra mile so it's really about reaching out to as many as possible I guess.'

(Interview, April 2020)

'Because most of the events we have are in London but people get dispersed all over the place and there are some areas of the country that are either advice-deserts or, I'm still trying to get this to catch on, but advice-cesspits. They are places where there are lawyers but they're so bad! [Laughs] They would be better off without them! So there are places that we would maybe, if we had a little bit more funding or the opportunity, we would go out and deliver it.'

(Interview, February 2020)

5. Changing the narrative: challenging prejudicial attitudes towards Albanians

Both the young people and the professionals working with them spoke of the ways in which prejudicial attitudes towards Albanians in the UK shaped how the young people were treated within the asylum system. Young people in the focus group talked about the prejudicial stereotyping of Albanians that they have to face in their everyday lives, in the media, and from their non-Albanian peers as well as in their encounters within the asylum system.

'They [The Home Office] express it as a mafia place, but they then tell us it is a safe place.'

'The Home Office If they want to put someone in jail they'll say they're all gangs, criminals, trafficking but if they don't want to give you status they'll say it's ok.'

'I go to college and people say 'Where you from?' I say 'Albania,' and they say 'All you guys are drug dealers, killers,' and the Home Office comes in and says, they say to us, 'You are drug dealers and killers' and then 'Oh Albania is very nice, safe.'"

(Focus Group, November 2019)

Within the British media, there is pervasive and prejudicial stereotyping of Albanian males in particular as criminals. If anyone ever mentions Albanians - be it David Lammy¹³ or TV crime series such as *Luther*, or *Gangs of London* - they do so in the context of gangs and crime, particularly drug related crime, with Albanians always being the perpetrators. The actual lived experiences of the young people involved in the *Breaking the Chains* project, and the abuse of their rights as young people in the UK asylum system, for example, are rarely addressed. The Immigration Champions offer an alternative picture of being young and Albanian, one in which the young people are victims (not the perpetrators) of violence and exploitation, and who offer alternative representations of resilience, vulnerability, diligence, generosity and kindness.

'[The Breaking the Chains team] should make the space for rethinking what their position is towards media interest, media involvement, publicity and wider campaigning, because, like you say when one encounters the Immigration Champions, it does change one's perspective quite substantially. It changes your understanding and perspective on these young people. It would be good if that could be done on a wider stage, rather than just amongst lawyers and judges and academics.'

(Interview, May 2020)

'It seems to me that the way these young people are treated is a really grotesque injustice. I think it would be good if there was more public awareness and insight into the way in which the system affects them. It seems either unintentionally or deliberately an extremely cruel way to treat children and young adults. It causes really awful damage. They should think about how to make knowledge of that more widespread.'

(Interview, May 2020)

'I think every day there should be stuff in the press around what happens to children in tribunals and what children are expected to do in tribunals because when that girl said 'Your papers really make my eyes hurt' I thought if I was doing this to a British citizen child they would say I was being abusive. Basically I was saying to her 'You've got to work with me otherwise or you'll get sent back, '

¹³ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-43653291> (accessed 20 May 2020)

which is just a ridiculous situation. You have to be constantly telling children that they might get sent back to their deaths.'

(Interview, February 2020)

Furthermore, interviews with professionals identified the needs for more robust research to fully understand and document the position of Albanian children and young people seeking asylum. Research on the lived experiences of Albanian young people is limited.¹⁴ Home Office country guidance on Albania has been heavily critiqued, particularly for providing flimsy evidence to support its statements on the extent of blood feuds, and for insufficiently interrogating the proficiency of the Albanian government to fully protect young people from exploitation and harm if returned.¹⁵

'Also, key to winning their cases, and that's what one ultimately has to do, is win their case, the key to that is the quality of the evidence that they can adduce. In particular, evidence about the situation in Albania that they say they need protection from [...] More work along those lines needs to be done, I really think that is the key, to show the evidence that the Home Office produces to say there is no persecution in Albania, or if there is persecution the state provides adequate protection... It is addressing that evidence which I think is the most important pieces of work that needs to be done for these young asylum seekers.'

(Interview, May 2020)

D: Building on the foundations of Year 1 – The response to Covid 19

This report reflects on the first year of the *Breaking the Chains* project, from March 2019 until March 2020. It therefore ends just as the coronavirus pandemic hit London and the UK (although some of the interviews took place after this point). Capturing the impact of the

¹⁴ Hynes P. and J. Dew (2018) Vulnerability to Human Trafficking: A Study of Vietnam, Albania, Nigeria and the UK (<https://www.beds.ac.uk/trafficking> accessed 31st May 2018); Walking a Tightrope: Hidden Issues, challenges & complexities surrounding the protection needs of Albanian unaccompanied young people seeking asylum in the UK. Summary Report of Conference (6th June 2017) (https://becomingadultproject.files.wordpress.com/2017/12/summaryreportwalkingatightr ope_final.pdf accessed 31st May 2018); Tahiraj, E. (2017) Understanding Trafficking Girls and Women from Albania. Working Paper, Shpresa Programme. London; Merita H Mece (2017) 'Living in Uncertainty: Resurgence of Blood Feud in Albanian Post-socialist Society and its Consequences on Children and young Adults' *Contemporary Readings in Law and Social Justice*, <https://go.gale.com/ps/anonymous?id=GALE%7CA519075065&sid=googleScholar&v=2.1&it=r&linkaccess=abs&issn=19489137&p=AONE&sw=w>; Lenja, V. with V. Pajo, T. Grazhdani and Z. Kove (2015) Responsibility Towards Albanian Unaccompanied Minors Travelling Across Southern Borders. Assessment of the Albanian Context, International Organisation of Migration (IOM).

¹⁵ David Neale (2020) 'Albanian Blood Feuds: An update' <https://www.gardencourtchambers.co.uk/news/albanian-blood-feuds-an-update> ; David Neale (2019) 'Albanian blood feuds and certification: A critical review' <https://www.gardencourtchambers.co.uk/news/albanian-blood-feuds-and-certification-a-critical-view> (accessed 20 May 2020).

lockdown restrictions on the young people involved in the *Breaking the Chains* project will therefore be a vital focus of the year 2 evaluation.

What can we see already, however, is that the vulnerabilities of the young people involved in the project have been exacerbated by the pandemic. In terms of accessing education, many entered lockdown without laptops, sometimes without WiFi, and were unable to access school and college work. Indeed, securing laptops and internet access for all who need them is an ongoing issue for Shpresa. For many of the young people who experienced self-confinement or captivity because of blood feuds and/or trafficking, being forced to self-isolate, often alone in sometimes unregulated hostel or semi – independent, accommodation, amplifies existing trauma and re-traumatises. All the young people were living in poverty, and lockdown meant that many could not afford or have access to basic necessities.

Such is the scale of need, the *Breaking the Chains* project has received additional emergency funding from Paul Hamlyn, which is directed to dealing with the immediate needs of the young people under lockdown. Additionally, this crisis funding has enabled the team to put in fresh claims for some young Albanians who had gone ‘underground’ (disengaged from formal services) but who have made renewed contact with Shpresa during lockdown.

What we have also witnessed already is the amazing capacity of Shpresa and the *Breaking the Chains* project to respond to the challenges of Covid 19. Shpresa was able to draw on its skills in fundraising and partnership working to initiate a rapid response, including the setting up of online daily activities for the young people, and the development of a network of volunteers to befriend the young people (to make sure that each young person had a daily call with a volunteer who could provide support and pass on any issues of concern to Shpresa). They ensured through their team of volunteers involved in befriending that vital resources got to the young people especially if they were self-isolating and that the problems the young people were facing were picked up. It was only through the daily call from a volunteer that it was identified that one young man had been hospitalised with appendicitis and had no phone credit to call anyone to let them know.

The work with the young people formed part of the wider response by Shpresa to support all of its service users, not only the young people, but families also. By the time lockdown restrictions were eased in July they had already amassed a team of over 70 volunteers, and continue to provide assistance (befriending, story-telling, donations of laptops and children’s clothes, fundraising, phone credits) to many vulnerable young people (in total 41 young people had been befriended; 43 were in receipt of regular mobile phone top-ups; and 31 had received laptops).

The Immigration Champions have been at the heart of developing Shpresa’s response to assisting young people and have been crucial in widening the scope of Shpresa to reach young Albanians who previously were not in their orbit. As one of the Shpresa members of staff explained:

‘I think the work we have done with them until now, without us knowing, I can say it has paid off. They are being the heart of the zoom, they are the heart of

themselves, to convince other people... From the beginning, the first group I contacted was Immigration Champions.'

(Interview, April 2020)

A lawyer who had been involved in online strategy sessions described the involvement of the young people:

'They are quite amazing. It is extraordinary the number of young people involved and the amount of interest that they have. It is clear from the amount of participation I've had in those sessions that they are a real lifeline for those young people, they put an awful lot into them and they seem to draw an awful lot from those meetings. They do seem really important for preserving their moral. It's bad enough for those of us who are integrated into the way things are here to cope with this kind of situation, but for them they basically have little cells in hostels or housing. I mean it is a horrible thought, having to cope in that situation. It's hard enough being a young asylum seeker in Britain today, but a young asylum seeker who is locked down... terrible.'

(Interview, May 2020)

As the Director of Shpresa explained:

'We took this situation as a learning, it is another situation to overcome. People that we work with come with a variety of issues, and what we are used to is listening and trying to do something about it. This is just another issue. And this issue is a bit better than the other ones, because everyone is in it and there is a better understanding. The empathy is there, the mind-set is there and everyone is keen to support. Whereas prior to this, our issues were not necessarily understood, our issues were not necessarily prioritised, they weren't identified as issues at all. So I think, for us, this is another hurdle to overcome, but it has put us on a level with other people. We were very quick. We were able to address it. Always we don't have many resources, always we need to look at where things is. Always we need to look at solutions.'

(Interview, April 2020)

E: Recommendations

This evaluation has highlighted the vital work that the *Breaking the Chains* project is doing in terms of improving the legal outcomes for Albanian children and young people in the UK asylum system. Evaluating the workings of the project has highlighted the effectiveness of their model of child-centred practice, taking on individual case work but also seeking to strategically engender sector-wide changes in the ways in which Albanian children are treated. In the first year of operation, the project has exceeded most of its objectives.

However, challenges remain, a key one being the capacity to meet demand. As one of the professionals in an external agency remarked:

'In terms of what they could and should do, I mean I think it is really more of the same. One of the main drivers behind setting up Breaking the Chains was the inability of Shpresa to find half-decent representation for these young people. Breaking the Chains addresses that deficit to an extent, but there is still a huge unmet need for half-decent legal representation amongst young people. The first thing I would say is they need to be doing more of what they have been doing thus far, and ideally it would be fantastic [...] if [the legal team at MiCLU] were able to carry on doing what they are doing, but if [more lawyers] could be recruited, that would be ideal.'

(Interview, May 2020)

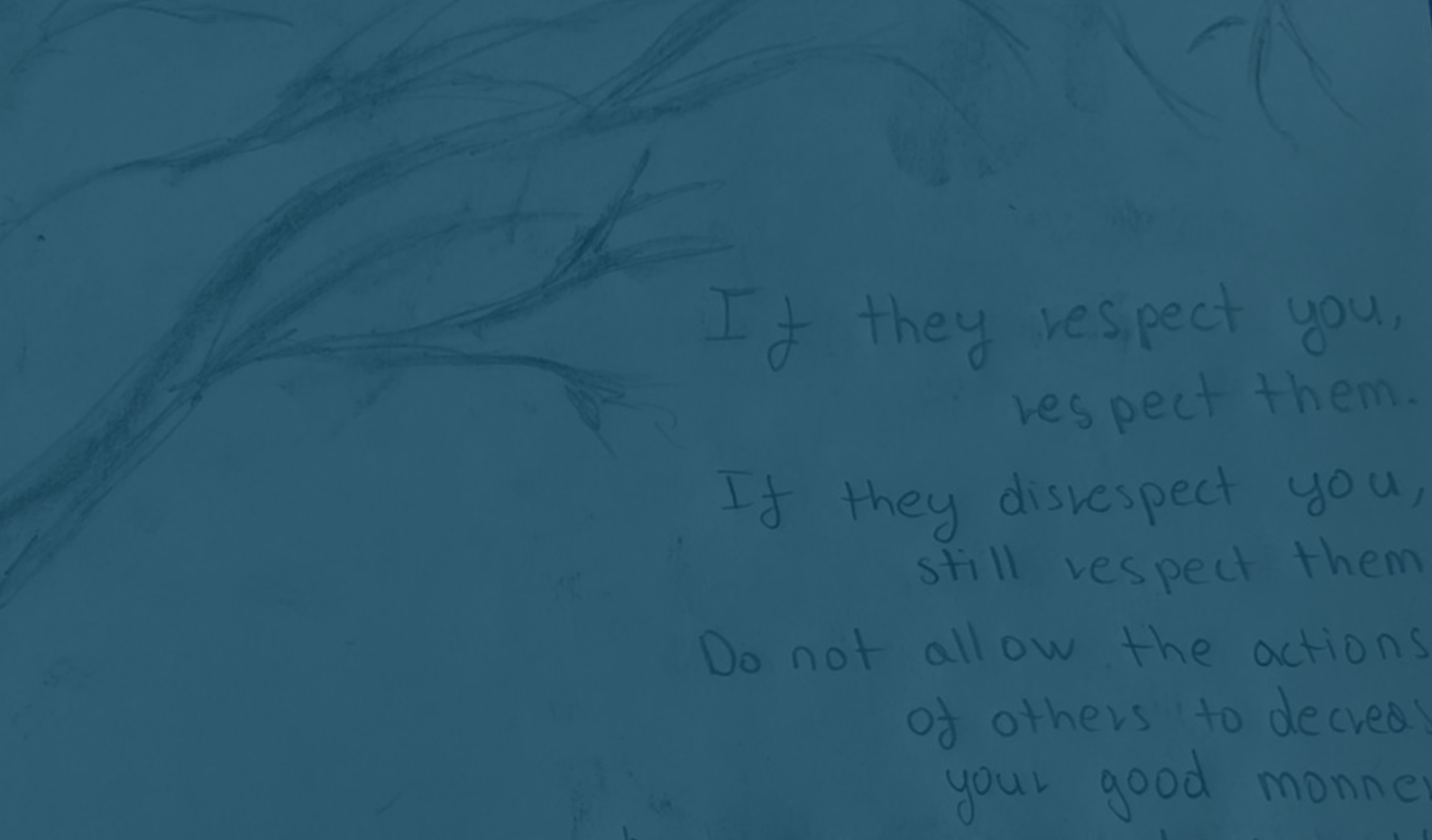
The importance of the work of Shpresa and MiCLU and their partner organisations through the *Breaking the Chains* project cannot be underestimated. It's not only life-changing for all the young people involved in the project, for some it is life-saving. As one Immigration Champion explained:

'My life was so hard at the beginning when I arrived here. But in the pass of time I got to know Shpresa and [name] who helped me to know much more about the law and the immigration. When I was in my country I didn't know about the solicitor because on my mind was that a person can get a solicitor only if they have criminal matters. I was always scared of them because I thought that if I do something wrong then I'm done. I was at my breaking point because no one was helping me and telling me what was going on in my life. Thanks to Shpresa and MiCLU my life would be completely different. They [have] given to me a lot. They gave me my life back. They have given me the chance to have a bright future so I can become a 'little helper' for this country because I can work and can pay my own bills, same as everyone does. Everyone came here for a safe life and now that I have my leave to remain, my feeling [is that I] will live and I will not need to think about death.'

E: Recommendations

The focus of the following recommendations is therefore on the ways in which the *Breaking the Chains* project can build upon the successes of its first year:

1. Additional employment of case workers at MiCLU to take on Albanian cases and to co-deliver training to young people.
2. Increase funded staff capacity at Shpresa, with additional training for staff on immigration-related matters.
3. Further consideration of the range of additional support for young people including extending participation of therapeutic organisations and befrienders.
4. Continue to foster relations with academics to develop research projects related to the lived experiences of young Albanian people in the UK and thereby extend the range of evidence that can be used to support Albanian cases (particularly in relation to blood feuds, trafficking and the impact of state policy in the UK and Albania).
5. Further develop public awareness raising of issues facing young Albanian asylum seekers in the UK through closer engagement with the media.
6. Continue to extend training of legal practitioners to encourage the higher take up rate of Albanian cases by good quality law firms.
7. Continue to pursue routes to establish the training of tribunal judges to become more knowledgeable of Albanian cases.
8. Explore ways in which the training of legal practitioners can be extended beyond London.
9. Continue to include the Immigration Champions in all aspects of programme design and delivery. This is an exceptional feature of the project and a model of good practice within the sector.
10. Funders should support the project to continue its vital work in assisting young people to cope with the pandemic and its consequences.



If they respect you,
respect them.

If they disrespect you,
still respect them.

Do not allow the actions
of others to decrease
your good manner.

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<https://miclu.org>

<http://www.shpresaprogramme.com>



breathing human beings, aren't even consciously aware of our existence most of the time. We float around like listless ghosts from one dull place to another, fading into the background and just hoping for something more.

We yearn to break free from this inescapable cycle of monotony but we just don't know how.

