

Breaking the Chains Project

Interim Evaluation Report



Executive Summary

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'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.'

(Breaking the Chains, Immigration Champion from Focus Group, November 2019)

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 is needed because of:

- Systematic discrimination of Albanian children and young people in the asylum system, and
- The limited possibilities of Albanian children and young people seeking asylum securing good quality legal representation.

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 and draw on:

- 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

The evaluation report foregrounds 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 remaining.

The project's successes include:

- The high quality of legal representation offered by MiCLU
- The development and implementation of the Immigration Champions Programme
- The development and delivery of a broader programme of training for young Albanians seeking asylum in the UK
- The ethos of Child/Youth Centred Practice at the core of the project
- Effective Partnership Working

The *Breaking the Chains* project is doing vital work in improving the legal outcomes for Albanian speaking children and young people in the UK asylum system, taking on individual case work but also seeking to strategically engender sector-wide changes in the ways in which Albanians are treated within the asylum system. In the first year of operation, the project has exceeded its objectives. *Breaking the Chains* illustrates the capacity to achieve real change through successful partnership working and a child/youth centred approach, which foregrounds the lived experiences of the young people at all stages.

However, challenges remain and include:

1. Meeting demand, as demand far 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 prejudicial stereotyping of Albanian speaking young people in the UK.

Recommendations:

The *Breaking the Chains* project is doing essential life-changing work to secure just outcomes for Albanian speaking young people in the asylum system, and 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.

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