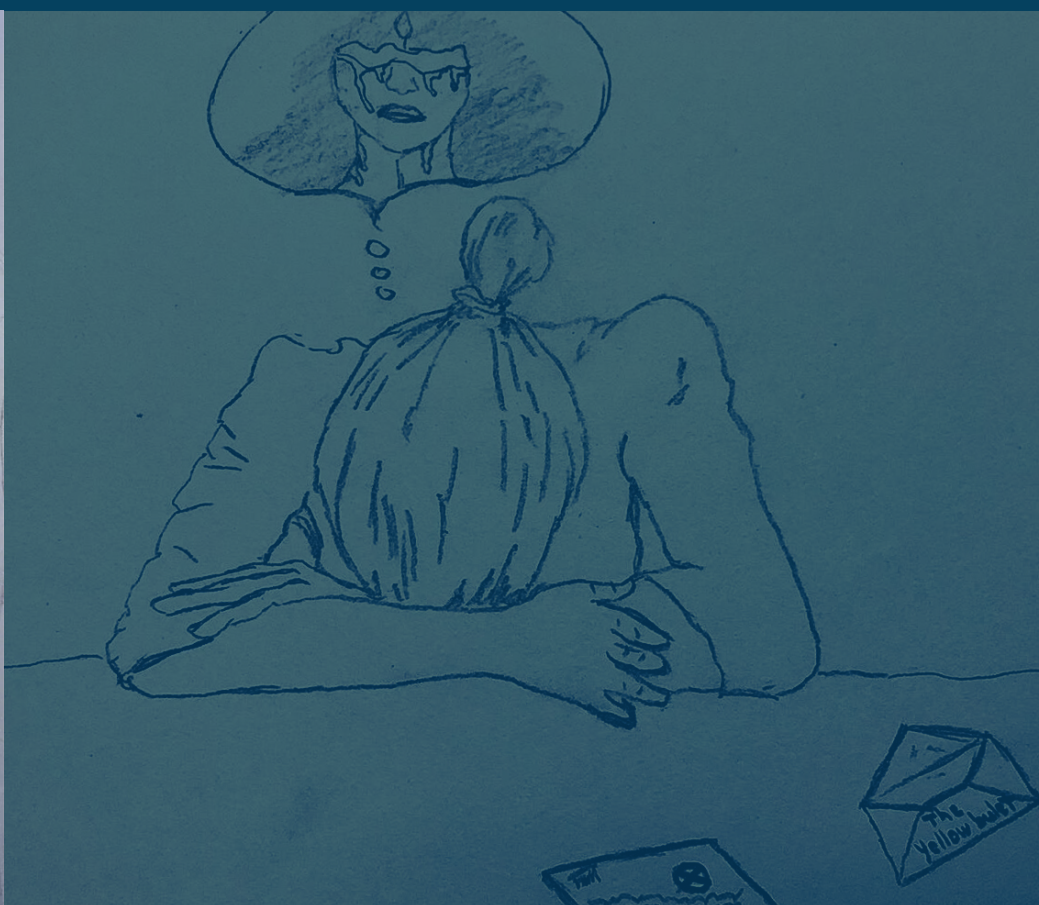


Breaking the Chains Project Year 2 Evaluation Report



Executive Summary

Rachel Alsop

June 2021

“It’s a big difference from [my first] solicitor to the one I have now, and it is because of that [first] solicitor I went underground and I spent 5 years of my life, dead wasted years but that’s how much of an impact a bad solicitor can have on your life and to compare her with the approach of Breaking the Chains, I didn’t quite have confidence and trust in the MiCLU solicitors in the beginning because of the experience I had before, I was afraid to open up, afraid to tell everything of my life and what had happened and how things should be told, but in time they make me believe I can trust them first, and as soon as they saw I felt comfortable and I would trust them they approached me the right way, and then I just took my heart out, I told my story and tried to sort my life out and I am in a better place now.” (Young person seeking asylum, focus group, February 2021)

The evaluation of Year 2 of the *Breaking the Chains* project builds on the findings of the first-year evaluation report. The second year of the project spans the period from March 2020 until March 2021, and thus begins just as the UK entered into its first period of lockdown in response to the coronavirus pandemic. As this report demonstrates, the pandemic and related restrictions have informed the second year in ways that could not have been foreseen at the start of the project and have fundamentally shaped the course of Year 2.

The Project

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 (PHF) and Reaching Communities, the project started in March 2019.¹ 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.

Specifically, 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

¹ The Paul Hamlyn Funding is for 3 years until March 2022, the more recent Reaching Communities Lottery funding runs until October 2024

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

Methods of Evaluation

The findings in this report are based on qualitative research conducted by

A) The evaluator:

- Focus group discussion with 12 Immigration Champions
- Interviews with 4 key members of staff from the *Breaking the Chains* project (from MiCLU and Shpresa)
- Interviews with 2 befriending volunteers²
- Interview with 2 experts
- Participation in dissemination events (for example Refugee Week event June 2020)
- Evaluation of training materials

B) Peer-led research. The evaluator worked with a group of Immigration Champions to facilitate a focus group led by the Immigration Champions. This included:

- 2 research training sessions with 12 Immigration Champions led by the evaluator³
- 1 focus group discussion led by 10 Immigration Champions from the *Breaking the Chains* project interviewing 3 members of the *Breaking the Chains* team and observed by the evaluator.

It is the aim of this report, as with the evaluation of Year 1, to draw particularly on the voices of the young people, the *Breaking the Chains* staff team, as well as related professionals and volunteers, to explore the achievements of the project in its second year as well as the challenges that the project has faced.

² Befrienders were recruited by Shpresa in the early weeks of the pandemic, in order to provide a daily point of contact for UASCs (unaccompanied asylum-seeking children) with a focus on (i) ensuring young people understood about the virus and were following government guidance (ii) ensuring they had food and phone credit (iii) identifying those whose mental or physical health was such that they needed intervention.

³ All the Immigration Champions participating in the peer-led evaluation are also working as co-researchers in an ESRC funded project examining the impact of Covid-19 on young unaccompanied asylum seekers and were therefore involved in additional research training alongside the training for the peer-evaluation of *Breaking the Chains* project <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/ioe/news/2021/jan/new-project-examine-impact-covid-19-young-unaccompanied-asylum-seekers> (accessed 31 May 2021)

Summary

In an asylum system already ‘catastrophic with its delays’ the pandemic has compounded the challenges that the Breaking the Chains team and the young people already faced. Delays in progressing cases have occurred in part because of the deficiencies of the asylum system but also in part because of the impossibility of being able to work safely and effectively with many of the young people remotely. The pandemic and associated lockdowns have worsened the mental health of the young people, and exacerbated the material disadvantages they already faced meaning the young people need extra support to keep them afloat.

Work in Year 2 has been informed by the necessity to adapt to the context of the pandemic with far ranging implications for the young people, staff from the Breaking the Chains project, wider service provision and the broader asylum system.

The impact of the pandemic has caused:

1. Worsening mental health of the young people
2. Delays in progressing cases
3. Exacerbation of material disadvantages
4. Adaptation of working practices

Nonetheless, there have been huge successes in Year 2, with the Breaking the Chains legal team providing critical legal work, policy advocacy and immigration training in conjunction with the Shpresa team, supported by lawyers at Garden Court and a wider network of volunteers and associated organisations, always working collaboratively with the young people.

The rapidity of the response of the Shpresa Programme to the needs of the young people during the pandemic was exemplary. In a context in which the third sector was forced to plug gaps in state provision, the Shpresa team quickly set up an effective network of advice, psychological support and material assistance to alleviate some of the worst effects of lockdown for the young people and the corresponding material and health crises that it brought. This response was essential for the Breaking the Chains legal team to maintain contact with existing clients, and to identify young people who required legal intervention. Without Shpresa’s vital work, the ability of the legal team to remain engaged with the young people would have been severely compromised.

The project’s successes include:

1. Rapid response to the pandemic
2. Protection of the young people through the pandemic
3. Delivery and adaptation of training programmes
4. Retaining and enhancing Child/Youth Centred Practice
5. Maintaining and extending partnerships

6. Advocating for and influencing policy change
7. Lodging fresh claims for young people who had become 'Appeal Rights Exhausted' ('ARE')
8. Securing some additional funding

However, despite all the achievements in Year 2, including some positive legal outcomes for clients, the throughput of cases has been negatively impacted by the pandemic, and the project vitally requires an extension of funding to achieve its goals.

Recommendations:

1. **Secure an extension of funding to support the Breaking the Chains project beyond the third year of funding**
2. **Increase and extend funded staff capacity at Shpresa.**
3. **Continue to advocate for changes within the asylum system (to tackle delays, to train judges to become more knowledgeable on Albanian cases for example)**
4. **Continue working to engage more high-quality lawyers to represent young Albanians in the asylum system (both in London and beyond)**
5. **Assess the mental health provision for young people accessing Breaking the Chains services, with the view to working with specialist mental health practitioners and others so that they better understand the mental health needs of young people seeking asylum and the importance of good mental health in preventing re-trafficking, exploitation and further harm.**
6. **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.**
7. **Review workloads of staff and to draft guidelines on roles and capacity**
8. **Further incorporate peer engagement in evaluation of third year of the project**
9. **Continue to share learning from the Breaking the Chains project and collaborative research to work with others within the sector and beyond to increase their broader knowledge of the lived experiences of Albanian young people in the UK.**