By Your Side (BYS) Service

Evaluation Report

Amy Woolger
Evidence & Impact team, The Children’s Society
October 20 – January 2021
Key Findings

By Your Side provides holistic support for separated asylum seekers, refugee and migrant young people aged 14 to 21, across London, with a specific focus on trafficking. **By Your Side is able to provide critical support to young people with high levels of need that would otherwise be alone.** The service model has four key elements:

1. **Holistic casework**
2. **Direct referral route to The Children’s Society’s therapeutic service**
3. **Befriending**
4. **Youth group**

“It has impacted a lot on my life. Before I had no life – I was starving, I had no food, I had no place to live. Since being in touch with The Children’s Society, they’ve changed my life. They’ve found me a place to stay, given me means to feed myself. I’m now living my life, I’m very happy.” – Young Person (Interview)

1. The By Your Side service has built hope in the lives of young people who would have otherwise been alone, and living in circumstances detrimental to their wellbeing.

2. The service has had a significant positive impact on local communities and systems through a range of mechanisms, including adding capacity in the sector, upskilling professionals and changing practice, and making systemic change through feeding into the work of central teams. Ultimately, as well as the positive impacts directly on local communities and systems, these positive impacts ensure that young people receive the best support in the best systems, building hope for their future.

3. Volunteering for the By Your Side service has given befrienders increased levels of life satisfaction and improved mental health and wellbeing, as well as developed their skills and confidence, and given them a new perspective on life.

4. There a number of critical success factors, which have facilitated the positive impacts that the service has had on young people, volunteers and local communities and systems. There is no one most important critical success factor; they work together to ensure we can build hope for young people.

5. While there are challenges for the service and opportunities for development, there is a significant demand for this service as it is, and without it, there would be a detrimental impact on young people’s hope for the future.
Jemal had just turned 14, when he fled his home country of Eritrea. Staying in Eritrea put Jemal at risk of grave human rights violations, prolonged detention, indefinite military service, forced labour, and violence, beatings and torture. His Father had been arrested and he feared that he would be, too; thousands of ordinary citizens of Eritrea are arrested and jailed without trial or access to lawyers, and most remain in jail indefinitely.

Jemal’s long and dangerous journey took him across the border into Ethiopia by foot, where he stayed for four months. He then travelled the 2,645km journey from Sudan to Libya. The journey took Jemal almost a year and he was forced to rely heavily on human smugglers to take him most of the way, who took advantage of his desperation. Each day, he fought to survive, and each day, he was subjected to punishing conditions, including being kept hostage and seeing people being killed.

Jemal eventually made it onto a small boat, headed across the Mediterranean from Libya to southern Italy. The perilous journey took several hours. Jemal was one of the lucky few whose boat did not capsize in the rough waters or was left stranded without fuel in the middle of the ocean. On landing, he hurried quickly on by van to Switzerland. From there he travelled onwards to France where he stayed in the ‘Jungle’, a large refugee camp homing thousands of refugees in Calais, before finally arriving in the UK on the back of a lorry in early 2018. He had been alone and travelling for four years.

Jemal had been in the UK nine months, before he was age-assessed by social services. In which time he had been taken into care, settled in college and started to make some friends. Jemal was devastated when they refused to believe that he was under 18 and rejected their duty of care to help him. Jemal lost the support he had been receiving and was offered Home Office accommodation for adults outside of London. He refused, and soon afterwards, he became homeless. Jemal had no one to help him, apart from Natalia, a specialist worker from The Children’s Society.

“That time was very difficult. I was very angry, because they didn’t accept my age. And I was also sad, because I had lots of problems... When I met her, she would give me a lot of hope to look forward.”

Natalia worked with another charity who successfully applied for some emergency accommodation, so that Jemal would have a safe place to live. Without refugee status and with an ongoing age dispute, Jemal had no income and was unable to work. Natalia referred him to organisations that offered free food and opportunities to meet other young people, and applied for a small grant to cover the cost of some new bedding and clothes. Natalia got to work on finding a solicitor to help challenge social services on his age assessment decision. If the decision was over-ruled by a judge in court, then Jemal would be eligible for appropriate accommodation for a child, such as foster care, full-time education at college.
and a social worker. She also referred Jemal for counselling, as he was very anxious during this time.

Unexpectedly, Jemal’s emergency accommodation fell through, as his host suddenly informed him that she could no longer accommodate him. He was forced to move into temporary Home Office accommodation, where he risked being dispersed to another city in the UK. The Home Office soon informed him that they intended to move him to Wales. Jemal found the situation extremely distressing and was desperate not to have to move to another new place and start all over again. The solicitor challenging the age assessment decision was on hand to challenge the dispersal. Natalia also provided a statement detailing why she believed it was important for Jemal to remain where he was, due to the impact a move to a new place could have on his mental health. Through the joint efforts of Natalia and the solicitor, the Home Office were persuaded to allow Jemal to stay in the city. This was a huge relief for him and now he could continue to attend his college course and remain within the support network he already had.

“I met her in my college, she was very nice person. She talked to me a lot, she gave me money for eating and for clothes. I was seeing her every week. I brought her my problems and always when I worked with her, I felt less worried... She helped to keep holding on while things were very difficult. Because also I was homeless, I didn't have clothes, they refused my age. She brought me clothes. She helped me stay in my accommodation, she brought me food and shopping. I wish many people were like her, she was encouraging, and I really appreciate what she has done for me.”

Eventually in the summer of 2019, Jemal’s age dispute case was heard in front of a judge at the Upper Tribunal. Natalia was called on to give evidence and another caseworker, David, went with him to the tribunal for moral support. Jemal’s solicitors expertly argued why the initial decision by the local authority had lacked legal grounding. The judge agreed and Jemal’s claimed date of birth was finally accepted. The knock-on effects of this were immense. It meant that social services now had a duty of care and were instructed to find Jemal housing back in the borough where he had first been moved to.

Jemal was soon placed in shared accommodation and was deeply relieved to have the age dispute case behind him. His mental health and general mood also improved significantly following this turn of events and he was now talking more optimistically about the future.

Having been waiting for the outcome of the age dispute case before making their decision, a few months later, Jemal was granted refugee status by the Home Office and his longer-term right to stay in the UK was assured.

“I am concerned about the young people arriving in the UK who don’t get the same support I received. I want to say thanks to The Children’s Society because I don’t think all of the good things above wouldn't have happened to me.”

He is now settled in his accommodation and has been studying hard at college where the feedback from his teachers is positive. His ambition now is to finish his ESOL course at college and gain a professional qualification. Alongside this, Jemal is passionate about music – he wants to develop his singing and also learn to play the piano.

“Now looking forward, I want to finish my education and want to continue with music school. I want to learn piano one day... I have nothing to worry about at the moment, I feel sorted. I thank God. I really want to improve my English and I want to finish that first. After that I would like to be an engineer.”

Case study produced with a young person and our Creative Team, provided for background to young person’s experiences
The Service

“If you don’t have experience it’s really difficult to understand... There’s issues and problems going on around you – you basically start a new life, in a new country, new culture, with new things around. It’s like you’re stuck in the middle of somewhere like clay or like quicksand. It’s like that – when you try to get out of that it’s really hard. If no one supports you and no one takes your hand to help you, to pull you back, you can’t get up. It’s really hard to get up on your own. And you wouldn’t know even how to get up – you don’t know anything, there’s too much things around you, you don’t know who to contact or where to contact, what to do. It’s really extremely hard, because you don’t know anything. Especially if you have to do everything on your own without your family… It’s really hard living such a life.”

Quote from a young person given to their worker during a session

By Your Side provides holistic support for separated asylum seekers, refugee and migrant young people aged 14 to 21, across London, with a specific focus on trafficking through the support of a specialist worker. This worker, along with RISE’s Volunteer Coordinator, came across from the The Children’s Society’s RISE service, which worked with trafficked boys across London. This provided By Your Side additional capacity for managing volunteers, as well as a specialist for working with young people who have been victims of trafficking.

Young people that are age disputed (assessed as aged over 18 when they are under 18), or transitioning into adulthood have no support from social care and high levels of need. By Your Side is able to provide critical support to these young people.

By Your Side has existed in its current form since October 2018. Previously, the service existed as similar models, in the form of Stand by Me and Destitute Youth, both funded by the Big Lottery. Since April 2020, the service has been funded through Unrestricted Income.

The service model has four key elements:

- Holistic casework
- Direct referral route to The Children's Society's therapeutic service
- Befriending
- Youth group

These elements are described below:

- Through **holistic casework**, the team works to assist with the asylum and immigration process and help young people to access a range of their entitlements across education, health, finance, support from Children's Services and with other practical needs. The service also aims to ensure that young people's voices are heard to influence decisions, systems and wider policy change.
“There was no one basically. I had a very bad time... When I came here, I had problem with age assessment; for two years, they don’t accept my age. They kept changing my social worker, they kept changing my date of birth, but [workers], they helped me a lot – now they accept my age and I've got my answer from Home Office.” – Young Person (Interview)

- **A direct referral route to The Children’s Society’s therapeutic service** to work with the young people who are ready to engage in one-to-one therapy. This is delivered in the form of integrative trauma-focused therapy (using the three-phase trauma model). The service works with children and young people on a long-term basis, which is essential for those with complex trauma.

“*We talked about my situation, my problems, about everything in my past. I explain to [counsellor] and I was crying and then she helped me a lot – she is a nice lady and she’s really helped me.*” – Young Person (Interview)

- Through the support of circa 20 volunteers, a **befriending scheme** for more vulnerable and isolated young people. These young people are matched with a volunteer befriender who can support them to develop life skills, pursue interests, and develop local connections in their community. Young people are able to receive support from a befriender, in addition to, or without the casework element of the service.

“*When I first started with my young person, I just wanted us to have a good time, as it was tough for him. We would meet at lunchtime so he could have something to eat and he was able to be a young person again. We just went to interesting exhibitions and fun music things. It gives them the chance to not have to worry about where they might get their next meal or what they might do tomorrow.*” – Volunteer

- **Fortnightly group and social activities** for service users aged 16-21 to improve their emotional and mental wellbeing. These sessions aim to develop self-esteem and confidence and reduce isolation, by helping them build a peer-support network with other young people who have been through similar experiences. Young people are able to attend the youth group, in addition to or without the casework element of the service.

“*The trips and seeing something different, having a day out, it’s been really great – it’s just a chance to not have to think about everything that’s going on, to just be a teenager, and to be silly with other teenagers.*” – Staff

In addition, the service has also offered:

- **Social education sessions for young people trafficked from abroad** to suit the needs of each young person. Topics include safety in the UK, healthy relationships and the law in the UK.

- **A drop in in Croydon College**, where there is a long-term partnership and a large population of refugee and asylum seeking young people. The drop in provided an accessible advice and advocacy service in the college, where workers could provide short term casework, such as helping young people call their social worker or solicitor, or supporting them to complete forms.

“It’s a very varied workload. For a lot of young people, they don’t have any English or familiarity with systems and processes in the UK so I have a role in interpreting things literally in terms of language, but also making sense of systems... supporting with paperwork, advocating, ensuring they access their rights, supporting the young person to gather evidence for lawyers.” – Staff
The Theory of Change for the service is overleaf. A Theory of Change outlines the context in which a service operates, its activities, and the changes (outcomes and impact) that these are expected to lead to. It also outlines assumptions and evidence behind these. This was developed as part of the evaluation, in consultation with the Service Manager. Outcomes and impact for the service are divided between young people, befrienders (volunteers) and professionals & services (local systems). To take into account the long-term nature of the work, and that cases are always complex, with significant challenges that are external to the service and not in their control, the impact has been split into medium term and long-term. Medium term impact focuses on the factors that the service is able to more effectively influence. Long-term impact is susceptible to more influence from external factors, and although the service aims to meet this statement, it is often more dependent on the actions of external agencies, for example, the Home Office. Long-term impact is an area to which the service contributes, rather than being solely responsible for.
Evaluation Purpose and Objectives
The evaluation aimed to capture and collate evidence, and specifically answer the following questions:

- What impact has the service had on the young people involved?
- What impact has the service had on local communities and systems?
- What can we learn about delivering this type of service?
- What is unique about The Children’s Society’s service?
- What can insight can we generate around learning and impact in relation to volunteering for the service?

Methodology
In order to answer these questions, the evaluation has analysed quantitative data collected by the service, and qualitative data obtained through interviews with staff, partners, volunteers and young people.

Quantitative data provided has included:

- Demographic data
- Reach and access data – including the number of young people who have received case work, the number of young people seen in drop-ins, and the number reached through group work and social activities
- Internal evaluation data – collected through an evaluation form developed by the service
- User satisfaction data – collected through the User Satisfaction Survey, which is completed with every young person who has received a service from The Children’s Society at the point that their case is closed
- Volunteering data – collected by the Volunteer Coordinators, evidencing the input of volunteers to the service

Semi-structured telephone interviews and video calls were completed with:

- Four young people;
- Six partners – five external, as well as the Senior Therapist and Clinical Lead for London, who manages The Children Society’s therapeutic service;
- Five By Your Side staff members, including the Service Manager; and
- Five volunteers, including two volunteers that also work for The Children’s Society.

Feedback was also sought from members of central teams via email, to establish how By Your Side staff and young people are inputting into wider policy and systems change work.

Volunteers, partners and young people were identified and invited to participate by staff members. Notes taken during the qualitative interviews with staff, volunteers, partners and young people have been analysed in order to draw together key themes explored in the next chapters.
Two: Reach, Access and Demographic Data

Reach & Access
Between October 2018 and the end of September 2020, the service supported 47 young people, and provided Advice, Information and Guidance (AIG) to a further 76, predominantly through the Croydon College drop-in. The service has also delivered 56 activities and events, including ice skating, a visit to London Zoo, adventure golf, paddle boarding and bouldering. These trips have had a total of 181 attendees. The service has delivered five volunteer training sessions, reaching 21 professionals, and a session to train Enfield foster carers, reaching 11 professionals.

Of the 47 young people supported by the service:
- 33 had casework support only – average case length 176 days
- Three solely had the support of a befriender – average case length was 486 days
- 11 had both – for those that had both, the casework support lasted on average 218 days, and the befriending support lasted on average 358 days

Eighteen of these young people also received support from the therapeutic service.

Demographics
The majority of the 47 young people supported by the service were male. Just over two fifths were Asian/Asian British, while just less than a third were Black/Black British. Over three-quarters of the 47 young people were aged 16 to 19. Around a quarter of these 47 young people were Looked After Children (LAC), and just over 10% were Care Leavers. In 2019, unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (UASC) represent around 6% of all LAC in England.

---

3 Some of these young people may have attended more than one activity or event and therefore, may have been counted multiple times.
4 It has not been possible to compare this to the overall profile due to data availability.
5 Department for Education (5 December 2019) Children looked after in England (including adoption), year ending 31 March 2019
Three: Impact

This section presents insight gathered on impact. This includes how the service builds hope for young people, as well as the impact the service has on volunteers and on local communities and systems.

Impact on Young People – Building Hope

Three young people responded to the user satisfaction survey⁶, of these:

All three of respondents were very happy with the overall experience of the service they received.

All three would recommend the service to friends or family.

Young people described how much they valued the By Your Side service, and the ways in which it has built hope in their lives. Without the support of By Your Side, young people felt that they would have been alone, and would be living in circumstances detrimental to their wellbeing.

“Social services disputed my age, but The Children’s Society have offered support. I was homeless. [Worker] helped with accommodation and education. They have given me hope for the future I am grateful all the time.” – Young Person (Evaluation Form)

“Because I can go to school, I can have my own will. At first, when I was waiting for the Home Office, I wasn’t sure if I was going to a different location. I was not stable. Now I can plan, I can do a lot of things.” – Young Person (Evaluation Form)

By Your Side has built hope in young people through:

The elements are discussed in more detail in the next four sections.

⁶ The User Satisfaction survey is a short survey distributed by The Children’s Society at the end of an intervention. It asks questions about young people’s experiences with services, and ideas for improvement.
“[The Children’s Society] have helped me more than even anyone else. They really have been extremely helpful. I definitely can say that it is one of the reasons I am still alive now, I am studying and still running my life for the future, and hoping that everything will one day will sort out.

Hopefully I will get back to my family and find them, and go to university. Being the person that I want to be. This is all because of The Children’s Society. From the first day that I was being with them, until now. They work with me and they have been really really supportive and really really helpful. Every moment of my life that I have a bad feeling, or I’m feeling low or in a bad situation. That I could do anything. Many times I struggled to keep my life. I was going to end it. But it was the Children’s Society and it was their help, giving the plan for me what to do, what I should do when I felt like this.

They support with my mental health. There’s a lot a lot going on. They have been really help – they did more than what they are supposed to do with me. The reason I find myself alive now is The Children’s Society. I don’t know what would happen to me if I didn’t have any connection to The Children’s Society– I am really glad. I hope that one day I become a person that I can somehow be with The Children’s Society and support them. Because I feel how important they are and how supportive they are of the young people who lives in this country. I myself I really struggled a lot, and it was really hard to live my life. The Children’s Society and all their support means a lot to me, and everything to me, and I will never forget that.”

*Quote from a young person given to their worker during a session*

Finding Solutions

Three young people responded to the user satisfaction survey, of these:

**All three** were satisfied with the range of issues discussed within their sessions.7

*Data from three user satisfaction surveys*

Young people described how workers were presented with problems, barriers and challenges, and sought to overcome them.

“She was always trying to find solutions.” – Young Person (Interview)

7 Two young people were satisfied, and the other was very satisfied
Examples of the support offered by caseworkers included:

- Getting access to a solicitor to challenge age assessments and progress asylum cases
- Supporting a young person to gather necessary evidence for cases, and helping them understand how cases are progressing
- Advocating on behalf of the young person with other agencies, ensuring that these agencies meet their legal duties, and constructively challenging where there’s a systemic or structural issue
- Ensuring the Police are informed of relevant information related to the young person to ensure that safety plans can be put in place
- Supporting the young person to understand their rights and entitlements
- Getting the young person into emergency accommodation
- Supporting the young person to apply for relevant benefits
- Working with the young person to develop their life skills, such as teaching them how to set up utilities and pay bills
- Supporting the young person to access other services through arranging and often accompanying them to initial appointments, such as:
  o The Children’s Society’s therapeutic service, where they are able to speak about their experiences and develop an understanding of their emotions;
  o The Red Cross, who can provide essential items and support around specific issues;
  o Horizon, where they can get a regular hot meal;
  o ECPAT, where they can access peer support groups; and
  o The By Your Side youth group, where they can meet other young people.
- Accessing grants and other funding to provide young people with items such as clothes, food, Oyster card top ups, gym memberships and technology
- Giving the young person resources to help them improve their English language skills

“I ask my social services for laptop, they say they can’t afford it. [Worker] found a laptop for me so I could do my homework from college.” – Young Person (Interview)

“I got in touch with [worker] because I was homeless; I didn’t even have enough to feed myself.” Young Person

“[Worker] provided me with some books in Pashtu and English that helped me to learn the language. I have developed so much that I can read and write English and I know how to speak it as well.” – Young Person (Interview)

“Recently, I had some news from back home concerning the person that trafficked me. I spoke to [worker] and she advised me about it… [Worker] has contacted the Police and they have red flagged me so they are aware of me so they can quickly help me.” – Young Person (Interview)

“[At] times my role is less supportive and more challenging because there’s a systemic or structural issue, such as young people from a migrant background not having their needs met by social services that are generally geared to British national young people.” – Staff

“Other young people who have wider support network, such as social workers, foster carers, PAs, it’s more ensuring professionals are providing their legal duties. It’s more advocacy and challenge to push things to be done, holding them to account and ensuring the young person is getting what they legally have a duty to.” – Staff
“They often feel isolated, alone, sad, traumatised. They don’t speak the language, they don’t get the culture, they don’t get the system, but then their practitioners come in and they’re able to connect, which is a big deal. They don’t speak the same language, they’re different ages, different genders, but they can form that connection. They can refer to ESOL classes, so they start to learn the language. They refer to befrienders, so then they’re not isolated. They can refer to therapy, so now they’re addressing their mental health issues. They can refer to a solicitor, so now they can address their asylum case.” – Partner

For trafficked young people, there is specific work around referring them into the National Referral Mechanism (NRM) as a victim of trafficking. There is often work to be done related to safety planning related to their journey to the UK, and challenging the Police over any criminal charges young people are facing.

“The main difference is the NRM. We can get them referred into this and it’s a route for them to get more support. It’s checking if they have been referred, and if they haven’t, would they like to be, then following up on that referral… There’s debts or threats following them so it’s proactively discussing with them a safety plan, how safe they are at the moment and what they can do to keep safe. With young people that might have been trafficked to the UK for labour or CSE, they might get arrested and it’s challenging this… It’s helping young people to understand risk and understand exploitation through links with traffickers.” – Staff

**Improving Outcomes**

Eight young people completed internal evaluation forms, of these:

- **All eight** felt that The Children’s Society helped them with their rights and entitlements
- **All eight** felt happier
- **88%** felt safer – with one young person saying that they did not feel any safer because:
  
  “I sleep rough, so how can I feel safe?”

Since working with The Children’s Society:

- 75% felt that they had grown in confidence
- 63% felt that they had improved communication/language skills
- 63% felt that they had grown in independence
- 50% felt that they had developed organisational skills
- 38% felt that they had learnt how to deal with difficult feelings

---

6 The National Referral Mechanism (NRM) is a framework for identifying and referring potential victims of modern slavery and ensuring they receive the appropriate support.

7 Young people could respond to this question with ‘no, not at all’, ‘a little bit’ or ‘yes’ – seven young people said ‘yes’, and one said ‘a little bit’

8 Young people could respond to this question with ‘no, not at all’, ‘a little bit’ or ‘yes’ – seven young people said ‘yes’, and one said ‘a little bit’
As a result of the support from By Your Side, interviewees highlighted some key outcome areas for young people, including:

- Improved independence
- Improved awareness and understanding of rights and entitlements
- Improved access to services, including therapy
- More likely to be regularised\(^{11}\) and for this to be done more quickly
- More likely to have a better response from other professionals
- Less likely to be homeless
- Improved confidence
- Able to be more assertive
- Improved trust
- Improved self-esteem
- Improved aspirations
- Improved language skills
- Reduced isolation
- Improved mental health and wellbeing
- Reduced risk of self-harm and suicide
- Improved life skills
- Reduced risk of exploitation through improved protective factors
- Improved access to education, training and employment

“I was 17, I was very shy, I didn’t have confidence. My social worker wanted to move me to somewhere, which I didn’t like. I was crying to [worker] so she contacted them and when she talked to them, it really helped me. They found a new foster carer for me. They stick up for me. At that time, I had low self-esteem and I didn’t like talking, especially to adults. The way I was raised, you never say no, you always say yes. They made me comfortable with saying if I didn’t like something. They helped me overcome this. If I don’t like something now, I say it. They are a role model to me.” – Young Person (Interview)

“He has become a lot more independent and has a greater understanding of what services are available to him outside of the asylum service. It’s given him confidence to manage his own life and… get help and support when he needs it.” – Partner

“I know things I didn’t know before – I have a right to access a solicitor, I have a right to find a place where I can stay – they have let me know and how to do it.” – Young Person (Interview)

“Sometimes when you’re moving, you don’t know things. I used to pay bills to my foster carer, but only to her, but I’ve never paid bills. [Worker] taught me life skills. She told me who to call. She told me what to say. She helped me apply for child benefit and everything.” – Young Person (Interview)

“They helped me to overcome lots of things. They helped me to improve my confidence. They are very honest with me. They don’t just do their job, but they help me more than that.” – Young Person (Interview)

\(^{11}\) The term ‘regularised’ means to establish their status on an official basis.
Offering Befrienders
The case study below outlines the role and impact of a befriender in a young person’s life, in the volunteer’s own words. This is explored in more detail in the following paragraphs.

“As a befriender, the only role that you are there to do, really, is what the young person would like to do in those couple of hours. So, it’s about facilitating that and trying to draw out from that young person what they want to do and how they want you to support them. And then trying to find out what their interests are, what their passions are, or what they would like to do with those sessions, and then hopefully enabling that to happen.

I see the sessions as being a really important opportunity for young people to be able to spend time with someone, who is just there for them. Because you’re doing it as a volunteer role, you’re not usually working with any other young people, so they are your focus and, during that time, you’re just there for them to have a good time, or do what they want to do, listen to them and be there for them.”

The young lady that I’m befriending now is in college most weekdays, and we’ll meet after college and do an activity. She wanted to get involved in dance classes, so I’ve helped her find a dance class. I didn’t have to dance, although I do actually quite like dancing. I just helped her get there, find it and introduce the teacher. She really enjoyed it, and she quickly got in with the group, doing warm-up games and things with the other young ladies, so that was really nice to see. After the session, she just seemed really happy and in a really good mood and she said thank you. So, I always know she’s enjoyed it when she says thank you for organising that and sorting it out.

We’ve also done different activities around the city, so we’ve seen the Christmas lights and we’ve been to a few museums. She quite likes to walk around, so we’ve done quite a lot of things in parks along the river. A lot of it is showing people what is in the city as well and getting them familiar with it, and the transport. But through that you often have conversations with them about how they are, how their day has been and what they’ve been doing.

For the last young man I befriended, he was going through quite a difficult time with a few health things and also with his asylum claim. It was becoming a very frustrating experience for him and he used to talk to me about that. It’s not our role to advise, we’re more there to listen and understand and then suggest who they could talk to. He had a lawyer, a solicitor, and also a caseworker, so I’d often suggest he’d speak to them about particular things. What’s quite good is that, because you have a different relationship with them than their caseworker, if you find out that they’re feeling a particular way, then you can tell the caseworker that as well. It’s quite nice that things can be picked up.”

At the point of reporting there were 17 active volunteers working with 19 young people from the By Your Side service. Since October 2018, volunteers have contributed 790:15 hours as befrienders to the service, including virtual and face to face befriending, and attending appointments with the young person. They have spent an additional 341:12 hours participating in other activities, such as training, supervision, and participating in group outings. There have also been an additional 176:45 hours spent by volunteers delivering group work.

Befrienders act as an additional person in young people’s support networks who is there on a voluntary basis, and acts in a different capacity to other professionals in their lives. Befrienders
described this as a “family feel”, or like an “older sister”. Befrienders highlighted ring-fencing this time and embedding the commitment in their lives, which creates a strong foundation for a positive relationship, and demonstrates the importance of the relationship to the young person. Young people recognise and value this, and it has a positive impact on feelings of isolation and self-esteem. The befriender can have different conversations with the young person, which are more casual and less focused on addressing specific issues in their lives.

“The literal act of sharing something about oneself and have someone be interested is in itself self-esteem boosting and validates their experience – they don’t have to pretend to be British or that they can’t talk about that in the UK. It’s a trust building activity.” – Volunteer

“One of the things they’ve [young people] said has been the continuity and consistency of having befrienders there that are there to listen to them with no other agenda – it’s an open, free space for chatting and exploring… The relationship grew more into chatty, conversational, like meeting with friend – talking about Brexit and Black Lives Matter and conversations at college, how they’re doing with school work, what’s going on at the Mosque. It’s a space to have someone interested in their everyday life, just knowing there’s someone there to share with every couple weeks. Also it’s just feeling at home and comfortable with people outside of their immediate circle – recognising they can build friendships with different kinds of people.” – Volunteer

“Having sessions once a week or once every two weeks, and sticking to that, ring fencing and valuing and ensuring that time is there, means that it becomes an important, embedded commitment both in your life and the young person’s life. It gives that sense of support that really is for and about them. Other meetings, events, activities aren’t taking priority, befriending is the priority. It sets a strong foundation for a relationship.” – Volunteer

Over a long-term match, they build a trusted relationship within which young people are able to open up to a befriender about their concerns. If anything that needs to be escalated is raised (such as a disclosure or safeguarding concern), the befriender is able to relay this back to the caseworker, who can then provide further support and make appropriate referrals. For young people without a caseworker from The Children’s Society, staff are able to take volunteers’ concerns and follow up with caseworkers in other organisations. Staff highlighted that befrienders had had a significant impact on reducing anxiety levels for young people going through the asylum process.

“I saw him for a long time and he got to trust me – when the terrorist attack happened, he felt he could speak to me about his fears.” – Volunteer

“Volunteers have significantly helped with support whilst young people are going through the asylum process. There is very high anxiety around waiting for their decision. Volunteers can flag concerns, and case work has been able to pick these up and respond.” – Staff

“My young person is not supported by a TCS practitioner, he just has a befriender. In my role, I can feed back to [worker], they check in with his worker about his expired travel card or difficulties with college. There are things he says to me, that I can flag.” – Volunteer

Befrienders are able to ‘check in’ on a young person, when staff may not otherwise have the time. The befriending service, in particular, has provided a vital lifeline to young people during the Covid-19 crisis. Caseworkers have been stretched in responding to the crisis as it has developed. Befrienders have been able to check in with young people and keep them informed of the changing landscape.
“[We were] matched just as lockdown started. It’s been that support network during lockdown. Someone to keep him informed of a rapidly changing environment.” – Volunteer

“Befriending is particularly valuable in lockdown – it’s another person checking in.” – Partner

“Volunteers provide a kind of support that is a mix between friendship and professional. This has been very invaluable in lockdown. We didn’t have capacity to do this.” – Staff

Befrienders can dedicate time and budget to meeting basic needs, such as ensuring that young people eat a warm meal during the day. Through their unique relationship, the befriender is able to advise and encourage young people to participate in activities that would be beneficial to them, such as the By Your Side youth group.

“He was having difficulty sleeping and it had an impact on his appetite so I’d use the budget to have a meal together. He hadn’t eaten all day when we met at 2pm. It helped me to feel that at least he had a decent meal inside him. It was purely because of his anxiety and sleeping patterns.” – Volunteer

“I volunteered at the youth group, which again has been very helpful… I was able to tell the young person about it and could encourage him to go to a session because I volunteered, I could let him know what the group was like.” – Volunteer

On a practical basis, befrienders have introduced young people to the transport system in London, and helped them to become more familiar with British culture and the English language. They have given young people the opportunity to engage in fun activities and see the sights in London, which provides a welcome distraction to the stress and issues that they face. Befrienders have encouraged and facilitated young people getting involved in activities that they are interested in, giving them a positive focus in their lives and reducing levels of boredom. They have helped young people build their confidence and practise their speaking and vocabulary skills.

“Having a befriender, you get to speak to someone one to one and you get to go to some places, the museum, Buckingham Palace. You come to this country and someone is there, automatically, and quickly you know you have to get this bus, you need this train ticket. You learn whilst doing these things. Someone is listening to you and supporting you. It helps you to understand other people and helps them in the future.” – Young Person (Interview)

“He told me he was playing games on his phone so I introduced him to more classic games that are played over here and what brands are well known for free computer games through app store.” – Volunteer

“Practise in English was a big thing – most of their social environment was with other Vietnamese people. It provided a cultural touch point and casual, informal conversational practise.” – Volunteer

“The long-term nature of befriending creates space for confidence to grow through sessions and that support to be there – you can move forward with developing a relationship and aspirations.” – Volunteer
Delivering a Youth Group
For young people engaged with the youth group, this has provided them with the opportunity to socialise with other young people with similar experiences. This has been particularly valuable for young people that are not accessing education. They are also able to speak with others in their native tongue, and escape from their everyday stresses and issues. They have had the chance to just be young people, to see new places, and have fun. Furthermore, other professionals are able to attend the group, such as therapists, which then makes them familiar and the process of being referred to further support becomes less daunting.

“The group is amazing – I joined it a couple of times to introduce myself; it makes it easier for young people to come to therapy. [Worker] is very good at what she does – they trust her, they like her, they will come to her and open up to her. It’s a lovely, welcoming, warm, kind, safe atmosphere.” – Partner
Impact on Volunteers

Volunteers highlighted how volunteering has not just a positive impact for young people, but also for themselves. The case study below outlines the impact of volunteering on a befriender themselves, in their own words. This is explored in more detail in the following paragraphs.

“The reason that I wanted to volunteer with The Children’s Society at the start, was that I was watching the news at the time when a lot of people were moving across Europe and I wanted to work with those young people. It’s also a really nice way to spend time with young people in general. I really get that from the befriending and from the youth club. It’s really nice to spend time with them and find out about their lives.

I also find it a very positive experience and really uplifting. And, actually, I find it quite therapeutic. It’s really nice just to have that time every couple of weeks, where you’re not really thinking about you particularly, you’re just thinking about someone else and thinking about what they would like to do and whether they’re enjoying something and asking things about what’s going on with them.

My favourite part of being a befriender is seeing little changes in the young people that they probably don’t notice themselves, because you don’t with yourself, do you? With the young man that I befriended last, when I first met him, he was very quiet. He didn’t look as well as he does now and over that year of knowing him, he became so much more confident. He’d go up and ask people questions about how to do things and he wouldn’t have done that before. By the end of us being together, he’d really come out of his shell, he was a lot more confident and talkative. He would ask me a lot of questions and he’d always ask me about how my family was. He turned into a young man, he looked really well. His sense of humour really came out and he was a bit of a joker. It’s nice to just see those little things. Also, just someone saying thank you to you. Often when we’ve had a nice session and they’ve really enjoyed it, they’ll say thank you.

With the first young man that I befriended, he found communication sometimes a little bit difficult. So, when we went to Liverpool to do his asylum claim, he was very nervous. I could tell he was very worried on the way, because he just didn’t know what was going to happen. There have been stories about people, when they go and present themselves to the Home Office, getting taken away at that stage. That must be really terrifying. But then we did it and it was really easy. But for him, just having someone to go with him, because even getting to Liverpool is quite complicated – you have to change trains and you have to get there on time. Then on the way back it was very sweet, because he took himself off and bought me a sandwich from Sainsbury’s and that was his way of saying thank you, which was really touching.

I have to say though, pretty much every session is more positive than difficult. I always feel quite positive and quite happy afterwards, really, even if harder things have come up and come out of those conversations. They feel like a positive experience – definitely.

As a volunteer, you find your own way of doing something and I think you can very much be yourself within the role. It’s definitely not as intimidating as you think it would be. You do have a laugh as well, so it is really good fun. It’s also really nice to do lots of activities like cycling and boating, because I sit in an office most days and I can see things with new eyes. I really love my city and I love all the things it’s got to offer, so it’s quite nice to be able to kind of share that interest and share that passion.”
The Value of a Rewarding Role

Being a befriender is a rewarding role and those that do it experience high levels of life satisfaction and improved mental health and wellbeing. The volunteer is able to contribute positively to someone’s life who would otherwise be very isolated. This is therapeutic and uplifting for volunteers. Peer supervisions are structured as an opportunity for volunteers to come together and learn from each other. These have given volunteers the opportunity to feel part of a collective seeking to improve outcomes for refugee and asylum seeking young people.

“It makes a huge difference to me. It is so important to me as a person that I find ways in my life to contribute positively to the world around me. I had never done befriending before, but I had heard about it and recognised there could be something special in that version of volunteering in walking alongside someone in their life.” – Volunteer

“For me personally, having this direct contact with young people makes me feel I am doing something.” – Volunteer

“He seems pleased to speak to me – that’s a nice feeling – we enjoy each other’s company.”

– Volunteer

“The peer group supervisions have been great. I like meeting other befrienders and knowing we’re part of something bigger. Working towards something together. Creating support and friendship for young people with migration experience. Even in itself, just being on calls, having a chat, is great way to feel connected something bigger.” – Volunteer

Being able to continue engaging with young people through the Covid-19 pandemic has also had a positive impact on the mental health and wellbeing of volunteers.

“That weekly conversation over the phone to check in with young people and to hear how they’re doing and just know you can maintain that support has made pandemic context less bleak. You can still be there and provide that support to each other.” – Volunteer

Developing Skills and Confidence

The role of a befriender is equally rewarding and challenging. The challenge of the role creates space for learning and development of skills and confidence. Volunteer Coordinators have also delivered high quality training, support and supervision, which were highlighted as key opportunities for the development of new skills and confidence. The development of skills and confidence has been empowering for volunteers. They described learning skills related to:

- Language
- Cross-cultural communication
- Conflict resolution
- Implementing boundaries
- The fundamentals of working with this specific cohort of young people.

“There has been a lot of professional training for the role specifically for this young person due to complex needs. This has included conflict resolution and extra guidance on dealing with trauma and disassociation… There’s also been more general training on dealing with young people. One of the things that has helped me grow and develop was the initial training around boundaries. When I first applied for the role, I just thought I’d treat the young person as I treat nephews, but I realised that this wasn’t appropriate – and that understanding of boundaries was something I had to work on. It helped me to develop and recognise the importance of it.” – Volunteer
“[The peer group supervisions are] also really informative and great for reflecting and learning, both from peers and training inputs. The befriending relationship I’ve had hasn’t been that challenging, in same way that other volunteers have had, such as working with young people with limited English or limited confidence. Sometimes I haven’t felt able to contribute on how to support with that, but at same time, I have learnt a lot.” – Volunteer

A New Perspective

Volunteers described how their role had offered them a new perspective on life. They were inspired by the way in which young people responded to the challenges they faced, and their attitude to life. They also described how they were given the opportunity to learn about other cultures and see into a world which otherwise would have been hidden. For many volunteers, this has changed their outlook on life.

“They are very grounded and positive in their outlook. They spend a lot of energy in building their lives up, and won’t let the outcome of the Home Office decision be the driving factor in their lives. They live their lives for themselves and their future. They teach me a lot all the time.” – Volunteer

“I have learnt a lot from them. How they approach life with such a learning attitude. They are constantly learning and thinking and reflecting. I realised I can be quite complacent!” – Volunteer

For volunteers who work elsewhere in The Children’s Society, the role has enabled them to talk more confidently and with more passion about the impact that The Children’s Society can have on the lives of young people.

“Each session, I left feeling I learnt a lot and had a new perspective based on how the young person saw the world around them. Even things like reflecting on the cost of things. Seeing the world through the young person’s eyes gave me more understanding of the young people I support in other parts of my life.” – Volunteer

“It’s made it easier for me to describe what we do and the impact we’re having on young people’s lives. I do get the information from other teams, but personal experience helps me talk more emotively. I’m more invested in it.” – Volunteer
Impact on Local Communities and Systems

The service has had a significant positive impact on local communities and systems through a range of mechanisms, including:

- Adding capacity in the sector
- Adding evidence to court cases
- Upskilling professionals and changing practice
- Contributing to systemic change (through feeding into the work of central teams)
- Supporting engagement and positive relationships (between young people and other agencies)
- Informing sharing between agencies
- Supporting the economy (through improved access to education, training and employment)

Ultimately, as well as the positive impacts directly on local communities and systems, these elements have an indirect positive impact on young people’s lives. Through these positive impacts, young people are more likely to receive better support within the system.

Adding Capacity

The By Your Side service creates additional capacity in an already over-stretched sector, where there are significant levels of need. Creating this capacity ensures that young people are given the time and input that they need from whichever organisation they interact with. In addition, many of the services working with refugee and asylum seeking young people have a specific remit on what they are able to offer, or specific knowledge on a particular area. For these services, By Your Side provides a crucial referral route for areas they cannot support with or lack expertise in. Partners described feeling reassured when referring to By Your Side. They felt more comfortable referring than simply signposting a young person elsewhere, and reassured that the young person would receive appropriate and high quality support from the service.

“A client will have issues and problems that aren’t immigration issues so I can’t help them with that part. I will explain I can’t and then will refer them to the TCS caseworker.” – Partner

“There are all these gaps. Me, for example, I provide immigration representation, but if the young person I’m representing doesn’t have a support worker, they have so much other stuff going on that I can’t help with: I’m not funded to and I don’t have time. It’s so nice when they have a support worker from TCS that I can go to and say they’re having this problem with their accommodation or whatever and I know they will either be able to help directly or signpost them to appropriate other support.” – Partner

A good example of where By Your Side has added capacity is through the Croydon College drop in. Croydon College has a large population of refugee and asylum seeking young people, with specific issues that staff felt less well equipped to deal with, both in terms of expertise and capacity. The drop in gave staff somewhere to refer their young people to, where they could get appropriate and good quality support. It was also very accessible for students, as they could drop in whenever they wanted.

“Usually, our students had problems with social workers or foster carers, main thing was age assessment, if they were age assessed as over 18 they were going through some serious things.” – Partner

“They knew the type of students we have and it was easy for students to go there and they were approachable.” – Partner
The service also frees up capacity in other organisations where cases are co-worked. This includes partners delivering provision to refugee and asylum seeking young people, local authorities and solicitors managing asylum and age dispute cases. For individuals working with refugee and asylum seeking young people, having By Your Side co-work cases means that they are able to focus their resources on other areas, whilst knowing that someone is in regular contact with the young person. For solicitors, workers from By Your Side are aware of the evidence required to support asylum cases, which frees up time and capacity. The By Your Side worker can proactively engage with the young person to gather the necessary paperwork, and hold the responsibility for chasing up with the young person.

“It’s additional support. Another person checking in. Casework tends to be crisis driven. If they’re not in crisis, we don’t check in so regularly. It’s helpful to know someone else is checking in and that information is shared.” – Partner

“It just makes my job easier because things like paperwork, which you really rely on as a solicitor, The Children’s Society can help with getting paperwork that I need.” – Partner

“As a lawyer, it’s great that there’s someone there to do all of the other stuff that isn’t the legal stuff and to know there’s someone who cares and is supporting them – someone who can check in with them and someone who we can check in with to discuss communicating news to a young person. Someone taking care of the young person’s mental health. It’s all stuff I don’t need to worry about, I can focus on legal stuff.” – Partner

For young people that are under the care of a local authority a considerable distance from where they are placed, the By Your Side worker is able to fill the gaps when it is not possible for a local authority worker to travel to see a young person.

**Adding Evidence to Court Cases**

Staff have contributed positively to asylum and age dispute cases through providing written statements which are used as evidence in court. Workers are seen as experts in the field of working with refugee and asylum seeking young people, and know the young people they work with well. They are able to articulate their views on a young person’s vulnerabilities, as well as the support they have provided to the young person. In some cases, staff will attend court as witnesses and to support the young people that they work with. They are also able to facilitate the sharing of evidence between the therapist and solicitors, when a young person is engaged with therapy. This contributes to the best outcomes in court cases for young people.

“Because the worker knows the client well and spends so much time with them and has seen them with other young people, and also because they are youth experts, their evidence is very helpful in age dispute tribunals and cases. They support with statements and giving evidence in court if it comes to it.” – Partner

“The caseworker will write a letter of support commenting on vulnerabilities and concerns, the support they’ve provided with referrals to therapy, taking the young person to GP appointments. It’s all important for immigration cases, and it’s easier if they’ve got that person to do it as it’s complicated for young people.” – Partner

“They were doing more than they were supposed to. For example, there was a boy who was age assessed and there was a court case and she was a witness in court. She didn’t have to do it, but she did.” – Partner
Upskilling Professionals and Changing Practice

Workers in the By Your Side service are seen as experts in the field of working with refugee and asylum seeking young people, as well as in trafficking and exploitation. Consequently, they have been drawn on to share their knowledge and expertise in the form of formal training and on a more informal basis.

“They’ve done a lot of training. They had a request to do training on trauma for the Police and a specific request for custody. They’ve done training for hordes of professionals, like foster carers.” – Partner

“The trafficking knowledge and expertise has been helpful – we’ve tapped into that.” – Partner

Through multiagency working and their role as an advocate for the young person, other professionals have been able to observe how workers engage with young people, and develop their own approaches to this. As an advocate for the young person, workers can mediate between young people and third parties, bringing about improved understanding, as well as directly and constructively challenging inadequate practice. They can hold individuals and organisations to account in changing this.

“It’s also always useful for me, as I don’t have a background in working with young people, to see how they interact with young people. There’s always something you can learn from that. That’s an add-on.” – Partner

“We can be a useful third party. I’ve acted as a mediator with college before. There was a clear breakdown of relationship and I was able to bring a bit of understanding. Gently remind the teachers of the trauma the young person has been through. It’s about helping professionals that are not used to dealing with this group to understand their needs better.” – Staff

This improved knowledge and understanding has translated into improved practice, which is beneficial for future young people that come into contact with services outside of The Children’s Society.

“There’s a lot of things they knew that I didn’t, but I do now… I’m more thoughtful around PTSD. I work with asylum seekers a lot, and they’ve helped me with legislation and become more updated on it. They tell me what the information is, ensure I’m providing what’s needed through my service and not trying to fob anyone off. It’s also been about finding out what’s going on in London and different organisations. I’ve made some networks and for any young people moving to London with a similar situation, I’ve got a list of organisations in London to draw on.” – Partner

“If I’m working with a social worker that doesn’t know anything about the immigration system, we might be able to improve their knowledge and make it better for the next young person.” – Staff
Making Systemic Change

Central teams and By Your Side practitioners offered some examples of how they have worked together to influence systemic change:

- Practitioners feeding into The Children’s Society’s submission and recommendations for the Independent Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration's inspection of the Home Office asylum casework system through the Policy team
- Practitioners feeding into The Children’s Society’s submission and recommendations on care provided for unaccompanied children to the Home Affairs Select Committee inquiry into Channel crossings, migration and asylum-seeking routes through the EU
- Practitioners representing The Children’s Society on the Refugee & Migrant Children's Consortium's frontline sub-group, which was set up during the pandemic to support practitioners working on frontline RAM services across the sector. Practitioners feeding into the organisational Refugee and Migrant (RAM) strategy and vision, which helped to develop the children on the move proposition; a national programme of RAM services linked in with Policy work
- Practitioners inputting into a piece of verbatim theatre, delivered by LUNG Theatre Company, about young people’s experiences of the care system.
- Practitioners inputting into a section about unregulated accommodation on Newsnight
- Practitioners inputting into the Covid-19 emergency fund appeal through sharing stories of the challenges their young people were facing during the crisis.
- Supporting young people to engage with opportunities, such as The Children’s Society’s Youth-Led Commission for Separated Children's Distress Signals campaign

Supporting Engagement and Positive Relationships

The By Your Side worker is able to facilitate a positive relationship between the young person and third parties, such as therapists or solicitors. The trusted relationship with the worker means that young people are more willing to engage, as they recognise the worker has their best interests at heart. Services become more accessible to young people, as they can be accompanied to appointments and have someone to raise any queries or concerns with.

“They can ask [worker] questions and she can communicate to me – it makes me more accessible to them – they feel more engaged with the case than they otherwise would do and it will lead to a more successful outcome.” – Partner

“It makes my relationship with the client much easier – they are clearer about my role and feel more able to ask question. They feel more in control of their case. It wouldn’t reach me otherwise.” – Partner

Information Sharing

By Your Side workers are able to facilitate a strengthened support network around the young person, sharing relevant information with those engaged with the young person. This leads to improved safety planning and better engagement. There are high levels of mental ill health in the cohort that By Your Side work with, so risk of self-harm and suicide are high. Similarly, there is an increased risk of exploitation for this group. Having more professionals involved with these young people is critical for safeguarding and protecting young people from harm.

12 Please visit: https://act.childrenssociety.org.uk/page/61180/petition/1
“[Worker] and I are in regular contact when there’s a co-working element. We obtain consent from the young person to share information on an ongoing basis. There’s been a few instances where a young person’s mental health has deteriorated and there was a suicide risk so we agree jointly on a schedule so someone is checking in everyday and safeguarding actions are agreed.” – Partner

“Where there’s a positive relationship with social services professional network, we can share information to improve young people’s safety. It’s a fairly frequent occurrence that we see a risk of exploitation, so we can initiate a meeting and agree an approach with a united front.” – Staff

In some instances, By Your Side workers have also been integral in mediating disputes between third party organisations, such as age disputes, and ensuring the young person’s voice remains central.

“A lot of it is linking things up – linking what’s happening with the social worker, ESOL teacher, key worker – playing a linking, mediating role. There are lots of cases where there might be disputes between social services and other professionals so sometimes mediating this.” – Staff

By Your Side workers have also sought opportunities to share insight and trends with other organisations in the sector. This gives an improved sharing understanding of capacity, and ensures that any relevant news or updates are shared more broadly.

“With other charities, it’s sharing things that we see in our casework, getting an overview of what’s happening in sector, who’s open for referrals, what people are offering – our therapy service is well known in the sector for being good.” – Staff

Supporting the Economy

With the support of a By Your Side worker, young people are positively contributing to their local communities and the economy, through improved access to education, training and employment. Young people are keen to work and get an education, but due to circumstances outside their control, face many barriers to doing so. By Your Side workers support young people to overcome these barriers and young people are able to obtain qualifications and jobs. As a result, there is likely to be a reduced cost and a positive impact on the system.

“There’s an example of a young person who worked with a caseworker, therapy and a befriender. At the end of the road together, he got a job at [name of workplace]. He came in beaming. He’s allowed to work, he got English, he knows how to socialise, he can navigate how to get there. In the media you hear so many negative things, but all these young people want to work, they want to get on. There’s young people that work hard to get scholarships to university and then they get qualified. Improved wellbeing costs less. It’s an invisible positive impact.” – Partner

“Young people will go on to do positive things for our communities and make a difference – having all these obstacles and barriers prevents them developing into the adults that they want to be.” – Partner
This section reviews the critical success factors for the service, as well as the challenges the service has faced. Further learning is included in our ‘Explore Further’ document.

**Critical Success Factors**

Critical success factors are those which have facilitated the positive impacts that the service has had on young people, volunteers and local communities and systems.

**Providing Young People with a Skilled and Reliable Practitioner**

The evaluation evidences that one of the most crucial parts of the service is providing young people, who are otherwise isolated and alone, with a qualified, skilled and accessible practitioner that they can turn to. The By Your Side worker provides young people with a person to contact about any issue, who can help them to understand and navigate complex systems, cares for them and doesn’t let them down. The worker is well connected to other professionals working with the young person and maintains an oversight of actions and progress, whilst ensuring that relevant information is shared.

“Whenever I need him, I call him; he never lets me down. He always answers my calls, he texts me, asks whether I’m okay, asks me to let him know what my social worker has said, what my has teacher has said.” – Young Person (Interview)

“Only The Children’s Society cared about my feelings. Social services and Home Office didn’t care.” – Young Person (Evaluation Form)

“Just knowing that they’ve got someone they can go to with questions and know that they’ll be there to support them in whatever way that they can. It can be very isolating in the situation they are in. Just having someone that understands the systems in place and knows how to navigate them and cares about them is so valuable, otherwise they can get a bit lost and confused and frightened. Just knowing they have someone on their side that can tell them what’s going to happen at each stage and find them the support they need.” – Partner

“We are someone that they can bring anything to. Young people have a lot of trust in us, and feel like they can talk about anything. We’re not judgemental or dismissive and we don’t say that’s not my job. We are in a position where we can support with anything.” – Staff

“Any time I have a problem, I can call them and she will advise me. If I need to make big decision with my Social Worker or anybody, I will contact [worker] and ask her what she thinks. With my housing and everything, [worker] told me, if I go to my place and don’t like it, don’t force it, you don’t have to. At that point, I went and they didn’t like it, I called [worker] and she advised me of things to think about.” – Young Person (Interview)

Consistency goes hand in hand with this. The low turnover of staff and volunteers ensures that young people can form trusted relationships with their workers and befrienders. They have someone they can rely on and open up to.
“What I really like about them, they don’t change change change. Today I have this social work, next I have another. With The Children’s Society, you have the same person for a long time. They know me.” – Young Person (Interview)

“If they go to Refugee Council, there are different people there. The By Your Side service offers one person they can get to know and trust them and build a relationship.” – Partner

A good example of the importance of a consistent and skilled practitioner comes from the Croydon College drop in. Having the drop in based in the college and a regular worker at the drop in, created a level of trust. Students became familiar with the worker and built a trusted relationship with them. They could engage with the worker before issues reached the point of crisis. In addition, staff members from the College were present to offer translation and could work collaboratively with the worker to share information and create a strengthened support network around the young person.

“The drop in was in the college and students trusted them, more than if I referred them out to Refugee Council. In terms of language, I was there and could be the middle man.” – Partner

“Later on, especially when [worker] was there, they had bond and students would go to him with things, like applying for benefits or helping with Oyster card.” – Partner

Befrienders have also valued the consistency in the staff that they have worked with. This has encouraged them to remain with the service as a volunteer.

“The consistency of staff has been really good – it’s been the same staff working since I first got involved and they’ve always been incredibly empathetic and they really care about what they do. It makes me want to stay as volunteer.” – Volunteer

Plugging Gaps

The young people that By Your Side work with are often those that receive no support from statutory services. For those in the care of social services, they have more rights and a greater entitlement to services, which gives workers more leverage. However, the young people that By Your Side see are often those that have fallen through the net. These young people may be age disputed, and placed in Asylum Support (often referred to as NASS) accommodation with adults, or they may arrive just before their 18th birthday so not qualify for leaving care support. By Your Side is able to plug these gaps, and provide critical support to young people that would otherwise be alone. Partners also felt that there is a gap in support in the sector for young men, which By Your Side is able to fill.

“There are very high levels of unmet need in this cohort.” – Staff

“They’re covering a wider range of people that they can help, which is great. There are often gaps, particularly for young men. There’s not very much support available for them.” – Partner

“There are those young people that have slipped through the net in terms of other support, who might not be in social services care, who might not be in education, so don’t have as many professionals supporting them, but are incredibly vulnerable still. That’s where I feel I’m having the most impact.” – Staff

“There’s a stark difference between those who arrived under 18 and went into social care, and those over 18 that went into the adult asylum seeker service. It’s a tragic difference. If she’d arrived two months before, her life right now would be utterly different – those who end up in the adult service, living on £37 a week, it’s a destitution service.” – Staff
Working Holistically and on a Long-Term Basis

Three young people responded to the user satisfaction survey, of these:

68% felt that they could always trust their workers\(^\text{13}\)  
Data from three user satisfaction surveys

Staff, volunteers, young people and partners all highlighted that the holistic nature of the service is critical to its success. The casework element of the service is holistic in that there is flexibility for staff to be able to do whatever they need to do to support the young person and act in their best interests. They can be creative in their methods and approaches, and are encouraged to think about the young person as whole, beyond their immigration case. Staff recognise which services are best placed to deal with particular needs, and will refer on for any additional needs that lie outside their expertise.

“Clients don’t have anyone else in the world that knows them as well and cares about them as much as their contact at TCS. That’s unique. Whatever needs they have, they will support them. I’m not sure anywhere else has that holistic, comprehensive care, whilst also putting the young person at centre of it and letting them decide what they want to do.” – Partner

“They helped and supported him with GP appointments, solicitors, education, arranging counselling, supported him into long-term education, worked in partnership with me if any finances or advice needed to be provided. They’ve gone above and beyond with my young man.” – Partner

“Some other organisations have to be a bit more boundaried around their work – they might just offer advice, and don’t get too involved in the case. For our service, caseworkers are much more encouraged to go that extra mile for young people, and given a lot of freedom to be more creative in that – how we work with young people, what that looks like, how involved we get.” – Staff

“It feels very flexible. We are not told what we can and can’t do. If we feel attending an appointment is of benefit to a young person, we can do that.” – Staff

The service model, with its four key elements, provides a bespoke wraparound support offer for the young person. The model links befrienders, therapists and caseworkers into a support network around the young person. These individuals are able to share information and ensure that the young person’s needs are appropriately met.

“The service is like pieces of a puzzle – you need all of them – if you take away befriending or casework or therapy, you are actively weakening the service.” – Partner

Staff are able to work with young people on a long-term basis, and are not heavily target driven. This allows greater freedom and ensures that staff can work with young people on the areas that are important to them. It gives the opportunity to build a trusted relationship, which is key in achieving positive outcomes.

\(^\text{13}\) This question is scored on a ten point scale, with ten being ‘always’ – one young person scored 8 out of 10, and the other two scored 10
“We don’t do short term intervention. We offer long-term support. We are not too target driven and we don’t have to turnover quickly to meet targets – it can be focused on the young person’s needs.” – Staff

Furthermore, the nature of working with refugee and asylum seeking young people means that cases are complex and lengthy. Immigration cases take a long time to resolve. Recognising this, the service can continue to work with young people beyond their 21st birthday. This consistency is essential for positive outcomes.

“The long-term approach that we take – it wouldn’t make sense to stop working when a young person turns 21 if their asylum application hasn’t been resolved.” – Staff

“Sometimes, because of the length of cases, related to stabilising their situation and delays associated with asylum processes, it can be 2 or 3 years. We do stray outside of the age bracket, which is the right approach. We don’t suddenly stop when they hit 21.” – Staff

Partners noted that the existence of the service and their holistic service model has filled gaps created by Covid-19 that would have otherwise had a significant impact on young people. In one example given, where the young person is placed out of area, the local authority have had to rely more heavily on the support of By Your Side during the pandemic.

“It’s not taking up my time as it would have done. The distance is a major problem and the language barrier to be able to support that young person.” – Partner

An Empowering Approach

Young people described how they had felt empowered by the approach workers took, as they are listened to, kept well-informed, always asked for consent, and remain the decision makers in the process. They valued the honesty and proactivity of workers.

“When [worker] isn’t available, she will always let me know – what she is working, when she’s on leave – she gives me another number. She always asks me for my consent to share my information. She makes me feel in charge of everything because she asks me, she advises, “if you want me to, I will, if you don’t, I won’t”, she gives my options.” – Young Person (Interview)

“She never says ‘I don’t know’, but she won’t say ‘I know’; she will say she will ask her colleagues and always find the solution.” – Young Person (Interview)

“A lot of it is explaining and helping them to understand the complicated systems that they’re in and I have a responsibility to let them know what might happen, even if it’s not very nice, to get them prepared for that so it doesn’t come as a massive shock.” – Staff

Three young people responded to the user satisfaction survey, of these:

68% felt that their workers always listened to them14

Data from three user satisfaction surveys

14 This question is scored on a ten point scale, with ten being ‘always’ – one young person scored 9 out of 10, and the other two scored 10
Young people felt that workers are understanding of their needs, offered reassurance, asked questions, and take action. The feeling of being listened to is empowering for young people, and encourages them to continue sharing their thoughts and concerns. With this information, practitioners are able to work with the young person to address their needs and improve outcomes.

“Whenever I don’t feel okay, I say ‘sorry, I don’t come’, [counsellor] said ‘it’s okay, whenever you feel better, we can book another appointment’.” – Young Person (Interview)

“Before The Children’s Society, I didn’t get good service - they didn’t listen to me. But at The Children’s Society, they shout out on my behalf and helped to move forward.” – Young Person (Evaluation Form)

“He always listened to me. I feel comfortable with him. When someone don’t know you, you speak, they don’t care. When [worker] speaks to me, he listens to me, he asks me questions, he wants to know more.” – Young Person (Interview)

“Very listened to because I always tell [worker] that my Social Worker doesn’t listen to me, but The Children’s Society does listen to me. If I’m telling them something, it might be a worry to say it, they will make me feel it’s fine to say that, you are not the only one that feels like that.” – Young Person (Interview)

“Sometimes people listen to you, but nothing happens, but when I speak to The Children’s Society, action is being made, they will always find a solution for me.” – Young Person (Interview)

One young person also noted that they had felt listened to because of their worker’s approach to managing disclosures and sharing information. They described how the worker would regularly check how they are feeling, and whether they consent to them sharing information with other professionals.

“They always practice safeguarding with you. Do you feel confident? Do you feel okay? Are you okay if I share this? Sometimes, you can say something and then they just go and report it. But they will always check. Are you okay if I go and report this?” – Young Person (Interview)

**In-House Therapy Offer**

One of the key unique selling points for the By Your Side service is the integration with The Children’s Society’s therapeutic service. Young people that work with By Your Side are almost always victims of complex trauma, following their experiences in their home countries and journeys to the UK. When they arrive in the UK, they are fearful of being sent home; are isolated and alone; don’t have access to the support that they need and may be homeless; struggle to understand the language and the culture; vulnerable to exploitation; and are put through a long and complicated asylum process. This has a significant negative impact on their mental health and wellbeing. There is a considerable risk of self-harm and suicide in this cohort.

“In the last three years, eight young people have killed themselves. They’ve all been from the same network, all Eritrean men. When we have young Eritrean men saying there’s something going on, this is the context and it’s very concerning. It’s possibly the impact of their journeys here. I’ve worked in the sector for a long time and it’s not until the last three years that I’ve known any suicides. There’s something very disturbing happening, and who do we refer to?” – Staff
The direct referral route to the service – which provides a long-term therapy offer and where therapists have specific expertise in working with refugee and asylum seeking young people – ensures that young people are able to access mental health support far more quickly than through the NHS, and receive a more targeted and high quality intervention. This gives them the opportunity to share their feelings with someone who is very experienced and can help them to understand their thought processes and emotions. In turn, this reduces the risk of self-harm and suicide.

“From experience of working for another organisation and finding it so frustrating when there’s mental health problems, and desperately searching for some support, being able to offer this in-house is a massive strong point of the service.” – Staff

“The in-house therapy is amazing. The vast majority do need some kind of mental health support and waiting times for CAMHS and other NHS services are too long. Even if you get to the front of the queue, it’s unlikely that they will have experience with specialist issues like PTSD and grief that affect our young people.” – Staff

Furthermore, the therapist is able to share information with the By Your Side worker, and vice versa, with consent. The caseworker is able to pick things up that are raised in therapy and fall more within their remit, and they can work together in safety planning.

“Where I have a young person in therapy, with the young person’s consent, the therapist will share things that I can then pick up and do additional work on.” – Staff

Having close links with the therapeutic service means that therapists are able to offer additional training to By Your Side staff and volunteers, building knowledge and expertise in the service related to mental health. This means that staff and volunteers are more equipped to recognise symptoms of mental ill health and better manage situations where mental ill health is a key factor. On a more informal basis, staff are also able to contact therapists with questions or concerns.

“[Therapist] has delivered training in suicide, safety planning, risk assessing… It’s improved confidence in the team, knowing how to approach this.” – Staff

“[Therapist] did great training session on uncertainty. Learning that it’s okay to just acknowledge and accept it.” – Volunteer

A further benefit of the integration of these services is that solicitors can access evidence from the therapist through the By Your Side caseworker. This process is fluid and efficient, and means that the solicitor doesn’t have to reach out to multiple agencies to access evidence that is crucial to getting a positive outcome in an asylum case.

“Mental health and vulnerability are very relevant in establishing credibility. To avoid the Home Office saying they don’t believe this, we will try and get medical evidence from a therapist that indicates what they’re saying about their past experience is true. Or if they are at risk of self-harm, or suicide, this is another argument to make for them to stay. [Therapist] has been involved with a few clients and also provided letters detailing her involvement with the client and any symptoms they have, as well as concerns about them.” – Partner

“It’s hugely valuable – they can provide good letters of support for cases of support to lawyers. There’s clear evidence that a delay of decision is having on young person’s mental health. It can come from a qualified therapist and support worker.” – Staff
Use of Volunteers – and a Well-Managed Volunteering Service

The use of volunteers is essential in delivering a key element of the service model – the befriending scheme. As evidenced in section three, befrienders have a positive impact on the young people they work with, add capacity to the staff team, and deliver a service that is seen as valuable to partners in reducing social isolation.

“The youth group and befriending are a fantastic way to compartmentalise the work. Our young people do need friends and opportunities to socialise in circumstances that are appropriate to them i.e. trauma informed and aware that English is their second language. As a case worker, I don’t have capacity to do that. Having those different areas is wonderful because I can’t provide everything.” – Staff

The management of volunteers by the Volunteer Coordinators in the By Your Side service has been highlighted as particularly effective. Volunteers noted that they felt very well supported and cared for, and described how they had felt reassured and grown in confidence because of the approach of Volunteer Coordinators. They felt that Volunteer Coordinators were approachable and communicative, listening effectively, offering advice and suggestions, and proactive in following up their suggestions for development and concerns around young people. Volunteers were passionate about their roles, and competent in setting boundaries, session planning and safeguarding, which they attributed to the example of the Volunteer Coordinators and the training and guidance they had given. Volunteers recognised that the matching process, the training offer and peer supervision had been particularly strong.

“The support around the role is also great and you have group supervisions, where you can meet other befrienders, speak to them, find out tips from them and talk about situations that you’ve dealt with. I think that’s really good. There are regular newsletters and things like that. So, it does feel like you always know that you can contact someone to talk about something and they’ll really understand. They really know the young people and there’s a team of people around you, which is really nice. It’s also quite clear that the expertise and the knowledge is there with The Children’s Society, in terms of things like safeguarding and how well supported I feel. If I do have information, I know where to go and what to do. If I’m concerned about someone, I know who to tell and what to look out for. Also, the level of training and support that you get has made me stick with it, because I’ve been doing it for a few years now.” – Volunteer

“I just want to reinforce how important the role of Volunteer Supervisor is. It is so amazing to feel so supported and professionally managed and pastorally cared for.” – Volunteer

“They were very supportive with training, making you feel comfortable. I knew what the role involved and how to set boundaries. They were very clear with that.” – Volunteer

“Training from TCS has been very good. It’s been about really listening to the young person, beyond what you expect to hear and what you find interesting, to actually what they’re saying and why they’re saying it, and using it to inform future sessions and to reflect that back. For example, quite early on, my young person was talking about college and was interested in branding and business development. I decided to go to the museum of design and branding. It was a developmental thing, but also a fun culture thing in another part of London. My young person was excited and happy that that had been thought of in a way that was relevant to their life. TCS guidance has been really important in this.” – Volunteer

“The communication from [workers] is amazing. I know if I need anything, if I’m struggling with anything, I’ll give [worker] a call. She’s just incredible. So, so supportive and gives you
the confidence to do your role and do your role well. If you need any reassurance, they are there for you.” – Volunteer

“[Workers] are amazing. They have made the experience so much better. They have given me the confidence to do it. They acknowledge when it’s scary. They don’t put any pressure on you. They are reassuring when you have a wobble. They’ve suggested activities to do over the phone [during lockdown] and the resources have been great.” – Volunteer

Training and group supervisions delivered to volunteers during the pandemic have also been critical in supporting befrienders to continue their role. Befrienders have had the opportunity to develop their skills around remote working, and access a reassuring support network.

“It gives me a challenge, especially at present. There’s no face to face and she doesn’t have WhatsApp so it’s very much on the phone. It’s working out how to create that bond and have that fun conversation and create trust and engage them, whilst allowing the young person flexibility not to speak. Some of the training has been really good, especially over Covid. People express a lot physically, but the lady reminded me that you can describe expressions, it’s been helping to communicate over the phone.” – Volunteer

“Group supervisions have been really useful. There’s training at start, then a conversation with other volunteers. Especially in lockdown, when we first transitioned to phone support, then had group supervision, I found it so reassuring to hear other people experiencing same things.” – Volunteer

Specialist Knowledge and Skills across a Cohesive Staff team

Workers in the By Your Side service are seen as experts in the field of working with refugee and asylum seeking young people, as well as in trafficking and exploitation. Having a knowledgeable and skilled team underpins many of the positive impacts on young people, volunteers and local communities and systems. For example, experienced staff are aware of the paperwork required from young people that lawyers need to support asylum cases, which saves them time and allows them to focus their efforts elsewhere.

“We’ve drawn on various different resources from TCS … in London, TCS has trafficking expertise in casework – it would be great if they had more capacity and could absorb more cases.” – Partner

“Generally, because they’ve worked with us before and other lawyers, they know what we are looking for… They are especially on it in terms of legal aid provisions and getting forms signed and stuff, which we can’t charge the legal aid agency for. Collecting bank statements, confirmation of benefits… they usually have it when they refer so it’s more straightforward.” – Partner

“They are very knowledgeable about what info I need to know if I can take on case or not.” – Partner

“I’ve worked for a few different charities, and I just think the team are super competent. There are a lot of people in the RAM sector, with various experiences, but there’s a lot of expertise and competence in our team and the wider Stratford hub. I think of our service as a bit more specialist.” – Staff

Partners highlighted how staff do a very difficult job and do it exceptionally well. They praised the level of skill and experience in the team, as well as their kindness and commitment to the young people they work with.
“The staff members are brilliant. They have an extremely tough job, working with the biggest possible challenges, such as suicide risk. The team itself is very qualified, very experienced, very good, very kind – that’s the basis.” – Partner

The knowledge that staff possess means that they are in a position to be able to appropriately and constructively challenge in a confident manner, and ensure that a young person’s rights and entitlements are met. They have also been drawn on to share their knowledge and expertise in the form of formal training and on a more informal basis.

“They kept me on my toes and it’s right and proper.” – Partner

“We have very high standards in what we consider as good in terms of legal representation and social services duties. We are good at holding them to account, maintaining high standards and not accepting adequate, pushing for more on a good practice basis.” – Staff

“Legally, GP surgeries can’t make it compulsory for you to provide ID or proof of address, but in practice, they will ask for this. If a young person asks British Red Cross about signing up to the GP, British Red Cross will give the information, but then the young person goes to the GP and the GP will ask for proof of address. Asylum seeking young people may not have the confidence to argue.” – Staff

The team are cohesive and work well together. The manager is approachable and experienced in the sector, and can be drawn on for more complex cases. There is a good level of communication across the team, and opportunities to share knowledge and reflect on practice, both formally and informally. Staff are able to provide each other with additional support and consider capacity as a whole unit. Learning on the job is also encouraged, and the team are proactive in building their knowledge in areas where they have less experience.

“Reflective practice as a team is, for me, very important and we do that as a team and in supervision, reflecting on what’s working well, what’s not. We are quite good at it. If people are coming across certain problems, we come together and discuss. If people are away or need extra support, we are not precious about cases and can provide extra capacity to each other.” – Staff

Setting Boundaries and Expectations

The evaluation of the By Your Side service has evidenced that there is a clear understanding across the board of boundaries and expectations. Partners recognised this to be the case, and praised this as good, safe practice. Staff are aware of what they can and can’t do for a young person, and this is communicated effectively to the young person directly. A plan is made collaboratively with the young person for the work they will do together. Volunteer Coordinators begin matches between young people and befrienders by ensuring everyone is aware of boundaries and expectations. Befrienders and young people are clear on this and recognise the role of this relationship.

“My impression is that, befriending wise, young people seem to have clear understanding of the support that will be provided to them and how it will be provided to them. Their expectations clearly handled.” – Partner

“They manage their time and the management of client in an appropriate manner. They had a plan and it was collaborative with the young person on type of work that needs to be done. Setting boundaries with what they can and can’t do.” – Partner
Established Networks and Relationships

The service is able to operate so successfully, in part, due to the established networks and relationships that have been built. Relationships are strong between the By Your Side service and the London-wide in-house therapeutic service, to the extent that therapists feel a part of the By Your Side service. By Your Side has strong relationships with solicitors across London, which simplifies the process of accessing legal representation for young people. The team are also aware of other agencies and organisations that can provide additional support to young people in areas that they are not able to.

“They have strong bonds with, particularly, solicitors, which simplifies the process. They know them and they’re very good. It eases the process. They have a strong hand in the network of London. They know a lot of them and some they know very well. They’re not doing their job on an island. They’re connecting with others.” – Partner

“Because we’ve worked together a lot and because they’re great, they would be one of our first choices [to refer to].” – Partner

“They know more than me on some things. They have all these contacts with solicitors and other agencies and organisations that I wouldn’t know of.” – Partner

“They knew exactly who to refer to – they network well with other organisations.” – Partner

Connection to Central teams and Other TCS Services

The connection to central teams, such as Policy & Research and Campaigns, and other services delivered in London by The Children’s Society, was highlighted as a unique selling point of the project, both by staff and partners.

The connection with central teams enables practitioners to feed in their first-hand knowledge from working directly with refugee and asylum seeking young people, and the impact of policies and systems on the young people’s experiences. Practitioners are also able to facilitate direct links between these teams and young people, whose voices are so critical to influencing systemic change. In return, central teams are able to update practitioners about the progress and outcomes of the lobbying and campaigns, and keep them informed at a more strategic level. This is quite empowering for practitioners, who feel that they are part of a bigger community engaged in supporting refugee and asylum seeking young people, and are able to have an impact beyond their direct work.

“We are really lucky to be working in an organisation with a large Policy team. We can feed in what we are seeing to make systemic change, and they can campaign and lobbying appropriately in response. It’s helpful to hear from them.” – Staff

“Being part of the COP [Community of Practice] and having strong Policy links, we can tap into that expertise and stay abreast of what’s happening. It’s an opportunity to address more systemic issues, such as delays in the asylum process. We are not frustrated in silo, we can feed things up for change… It’s good to have colleagues in Policy with passion and interest in this area. It gives solidarity that would be missing.” – Staff

“The connection with Policy and being able to raise issues that might be affecting more people than we are working with – we have a great symbiotic exchange with Policy.” – Staff

The connection with The Children Society’s Disrupting Exploitation team and other internal exploitation teams has strengthened the service’s positioning as experts in the field, in particular in relation to trafficking and exploitation. Staff are able to draw on the expertise of their colleagues for cases where there are issues related to exploitation.
opportunity to access individuals with a breadth of knowledge and a range of experiences, improving the likelihood of finding appropriate solutions to presenting challenges. This promotes best practice, encourages upskilling between teams, and improves confidence.

“We have advantage as practitioners in TCS being linked in with best practice, Policy, specific issues around exploitation and trafficking, the community of practice – where we’re placed and resources we can access from other colleagues and teams.” – Staff

“Having other specialists in other TCS projects in London that we can tap into, such as trafficking... We can call on our colleagues.” – Staff

“Being embedded in TCS is fantastic. There’s a great deal of overlap. Our service incorporates a trafficking specialist, but issues of CCE/CSE come up regularly. Having input of dedicated practitioners in RISE/DEx is great.” – Staff

“I feel more comfortable doing this as part of TCS, as we have a good profile for work around CCE and can draw on the expertise of colleagues in DEx/RISE to hold effective meetings and know what approaches to take.” – Staff

Practitioners are also able to access other opportunities for young people through The Children’s Society. This includes funding, such as Pot of Gold, and access to apprenticeships and job opportunities. In addition, the By Your Side service is a part of The Children’s Society’s national network of services specifically for refugee and asylum seeking young people. Existing in this network means that, in very exceptional cases, and where there is an available service, The Children’s Society can provide continuity of support when young people are relocated to different cities.

“It’s very joined up. I had a client who, for various reasons, couldn’t be treated as a child during their age assessment and we had no control over where he would be. He was sent to Newcastle. Because of the support he had here in London from TCS, they were able to get support from TCS in Newcastle. He was able to settle there and felt more at home.” – Partner
Challenges
The evaluation has highlighted a number of challenges for the service.

The Covid-19 Pandemic
The outbreak of coronavirus has impacted all of The Children’s Society’s services nationally, and By Your Side is no exception. The service has transitioned quickly to remote working to ensure continuity of support for vulnerable young people, but this has impacted on opportunities to engage most effectively with young people. Particularly with those who are second language English speakers, who often find it harder to engage digitally. Volunteers in the befriending service described the difficulties of working with young people where there is a language barrier on a remote basis.

“Since lockdown, face to face is now weekly catch up calls. It's more tricky. It’s more difficult to communicate over the phone across a language barrier.” – Volunteer

On the other hand, the move to remote working has also had a positive impact. For example, it has increased the levels and frequency of contact that befrienders have had with young people. Staff described how the level of enthusiasm and commitment from volunteers has been maintained throughout the crisis. However, they also felt that young people do not always get as much out of phone befriending.

“Now during Covid, [workers] moved us quickly to phone provision. We now speak to them more regularly. We have weekly phone contact.” – Volunteer

“We had just started to move to risk assessing face to face meets, but it might be on hold again. Every week that changes. Given that, volunteers enthusiasm and commitment has kept up, on the whole. There are regular calls taking place with young people.” – Staff

“The impact of Covid has been significant, but people have adapted. The level of engagement with young people has dropped off, as they’d prefer to meet face to face and don’t get as much out of phone befriending.” – Staff

Volunteer Coordinators have been keen to address challenges related to remote working for befrienders. Although it hasn’t always been possible to overcome every issue, volunteers described how Volunteer Coordinators had listened to their feedback on what they needed to better engage young people remotely, and had sought to address this. This included upgrading phones.

“Covid could have been difficult for matching us and young people, but they really listened to us. I said it would be good if we could have a more upgraded phone so if we found an interesting video, we could share it with young people and watch it at the same time. They really took on those kind of ideas. They did provide us with more an upgraded phone.” – Volunteer

Like the befriending service, the youth group has also been difficult to deliver on a remote basis, and staff described that it hadn’t worked as a remote offer, mainly because of language barriers, but also because of a lack of confidence around using the technology.

“Young people get a lot out of the group stuff, but online hasn’t really worked. It’s not particularly accessible and it’s outside of our comfort zone. It’s difficult to cater to different levels of English and to allow everyone to contribute.” – Staff

Partners in the therapeutic service recognised challenges in engaging with young people on a remote basis because of the lack of face to face interaction with the caseworker. Previously,
they would have had the opportunity to work closely with the By Your Side caseworker to introduce young people to therapy in a gentler manner.

“It was easier before lockdown. If a client was not sure of therapy, we would do a handover. It starts very gently. It might be a hello, I may join session for 5 minutes. There’s no pressure, and once they want to engage, we may do some joint introductions. It was a very smooth process. With lockdown, it’s more of a cold call.” – Partner

As the Covid-19 pandemic was unfolding, The Children Society introduced new procedures and risk assessment measures in order to best protect young people, staff and volunteers. Staff and volunteers highlighted some frustrations in relation to returning to face to face work with young people, following the easing of the first national lockdown restrictions. They noted that, before it had been authorised, they had been keen to return to face to face working, and felt that other organisations in the sector were returning to this more quickly. However, organisational decision making was taken in the context of the duty of care to both staff and young people, and in a climate where the understanding and impact of the virus was rapidly developing and changing on a daily basis. Rigorous consultation and risk assessment, with careful consideration of young people and staff safety, took time to undertake comprehensively.

There were also plans to develop work related to directly and indirectly (through working with other professionals) supporting young people that have been trafficked, but this was not possible due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Nevertheless, partners described the By Your Side staff as experts in the field of working with refugee and asylum seeking young people, as well as in trafficking and exploitation.

External Environment
The service operates in a challenging external environment. Some in the sector refer to the policies that govern this as the "hostile environment", mirroring the language of Theresa May in 2012. The environment includes measures to limit access to work, housing, health care, bank accounts and more. The majority of these proposals became law via the Immigration Act 2014, and have since been tightened or expanded under the Immigration Act 2016. Services that work with young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds are consistently trying to make change and progress in this context.

Young people face many factors that have a significant impact on their lives when arriving in the UK, such as age disputes and discrimination. Not only does this have a significant impact on the young person, but also on the staff and volunteers working with them. The By Your Side staff team and volunteers acknowledged how supportive they find their line management to be in managing these stressors. It is critical that staff are able to access appropriate mental health support.

“The hardest thing is when someone is really frustrated, and you really can’t make it any better. With the last young man that I befriended, I did find that hard towards the end because he was visibly frustrated about his situation, but there was nothing that I could do about it. There was no advice I could give him, other than you’re doing the right thing and you just have to wait for that decision. Sometimes that’s quite upsetting, because you can’t help someone, apart from being there for them to talk to.” – Volunteer

Resources and Capacity
One of the key challenges for the service is resource and capacity. Partners acknowledged that the service is sensible in the number of young people that they will casework at one time, but also near unanimously said that they would value the service having a greater capacity,
and the ability to absorb more referrals, including referrals from outside the London area. That said, partners recognised that staff are responsive to referrals, will make every effort to take them on, and are continually communicative about capacity. Staff noted that there is a trade-off between undertaking long-term pieces of work, which are necessary with this cohort, and an ability to take on referrals. In order to meet demand, the service would need additional staff.

“The only issue is capacity, but efforts are always made to absorb referrals we’ve sent or let us know when capacity’s improved.” – Partner

“Their casework capacity is fairly low. They’re strict on the numbers of young people they will casework at one point. This is probably quite sensible and allows for more careful rigorous work.” – Partner

“We’ve not always been able to refer in, but I always know whether we can or not. It doesn’t go into a black hole.” – Partner

“Capacity – that’s the only thing really. We have clients to refer if we were able to, including clients outside of London. There’s not enough support for them.” – Partner

**Funding and a Secure Future**

As often is the case in the third sector, gaining consistent funding is challenging. It is evident that there is a demand for the service and the evaluation highlights the impact that the service has had on young people, volunteers and local communities and systems. Having a more secure financial future would allow the service to take a longer-term view, and create an improved level of stability for all stakeholders involved with the service.

“I’m so pleased that there are organisations in London that can provide such excellent work – why aren’t there more projects similar? Funding is obviously a massive issue. You draw this money down and then it comes to an end. It’s a shame a lot of projects go by your by and then you have to re-write another proposal. It takes a few years to get working and then the funding gets pulled. If they’re doing a great job, why not continue? I want long-term continuous service.” – Partner

“The wider bigger context is the on off nature of frontline funding. It’s always there, that insecurity for our young people and the service.” – Staff

Staff and partners highlighted the implications of the loss of the By Your Side service on an already over-stretched sector. They discussed the impact on young people and their mental health, as well as a lack of expertise in the sector. They described young people being alone and services having nowhere to turn to.

“They’d be big. If we didn’t have this project, you have a horde of people who need to be redistributed – and other services are already stretched so they would be put on waiting list or declined… I think suicides would go up, self-harm, I would imagine to go up… The longer you wait, more painful it gets. You’d also probably see a higher rate of negative asylum decisions. It’s awful, but it’s the way it works. If they don’t have a caseworker or therapist to give them a letter to back up their claim. You’d see vulnerability on all levels increase.” – Partner

“I don’t know how young people would be able to do the stuff the service is doing for them. There are so many interwoven issues to deal with. We can’t do it and we’re not youth specialists. There’s mental health issues and suicidal thoughts. It would disastrous for the individuals. Professionally, we need somewhere we can refer clients in for all of the other things going on in their lives.” – Partner
“A lot of young people would be left. There’s already a lot of young people who are completely alone and don’t have any support. Services like this are so valuable for all the reasons I’ve explained. It would be huge loss as so many young people are being helped. It would leave a lot of young people, who are already extremely isolated and vulnerable, more so. There aren’t enough services like this as it is.” – Partner

“For the client, it would be a massive shame. The service they provide is one of the best services I’ve seen as regards to support they provide and it’s heartfelt. It’s client based and personalised, specific to the needs of the young person. There’s been no dip or change in the service when staff have changed. There’s a consistency in the way it works. I want it to continue for the sake of young people.” – Partner

Nevertheless, staff are experienced in preparing young people and volunteers for the closure of services. When funding ceased for RISE, staff, who are now part of By Your Side, worked with volunteers at the earliest stages to reflect on the process of withdrawing support from young people. Volunteers felt well-informed and well-supported, and were able to translate this into sessions with young people. Some of these volunteers now volunteer with By Your Side, and are, therefore, more confident in the approach to take should the service cease to exist.

“I’ve been managing expectations around the service ending. It happened with RISE and has re-circled again now with looking at a Spring timeline with By Your Side. With RISE, early on, they were flagging and reflecting and talking through with volunteers. They were understanding of circumstances and regularly keeping me updated. I felt very supported and clear. There’s always a bit of anxiety when it’s an external choice to end relationship, not coming from the volunteer or young person. Because I was well prepared, I was able to talk to the young person about coming to closure after a year. We found ways of talking about it beyond the service closing, like reaching an annual review point, circumstances of befriending may come to end. I could also discuss this and reflect on it in volunteer supervision.” – Volunteer

Managing Boundaries

While the ability of staff and volunteers to set clear boundaries and expectations was highlighted as a critical success factor, it was also recognised that, sometimes, with the nature of the work, there can be challenges with managing these boundaries. Due to the long-term nature of support, it can be difficult to judge the appropriate time to end the professional relationship. Given the level of risk, practitioners can often take on young people’s worries and concerns as their own, which can create additional pressure and stress.

“When you get very involved in a young person’s life, particularly those without other professionals, there’s a risk of being too involved in the young person’s life. That creates difficulties around when to end a professional relationship. It’s an ongoing challenge, and a natural part of the way we work. It’s an issue we reflect on regularly.” – Staff

This is an issue that the team regularly reflect on, are acutely aware of, and strive to manage appropriately, and have drawn on the support of the therapeutic service to deliver additional training around this.

“Letting go of cases when everything’s not perfect and you have that relationship. We have done a session with [therapist] on endings and emotional impact. There is constant flux so where do you end? It’s about knowing where and how to end, and it’s a challenge.” – Staff

“When we get too involved, we have good practice on reflecting on that, and how we manage that and draw back.” – Staff
Opportunities

The evaluation has also identified three key opportunities for development of the service. It is important to note that some of these opportunities would require further funding.

Improved Coordination in the Sector

One partner highlighted that there is an opportunity to improve coordination in the sector through working together to better prioritise cases and manage capacity as a whole. With further funding, there is an opportunity for the team to be at the forefront of revolutionising the way third sector organisations work together to support refugee and asylum seeking young people in London.

“There could be greater coordination between different caseworking services. When capacity is always such an issue, thinking collectively about what types of cases are prioritised. Everyone is always at full capacity and everyone prioritises the same cases. We need more integration and referral coordination.” – Partner

Use of Volunteers

With the issues related to resources and capacity in mind, staff and volunteers felt that there is an opportunity to make better use of volunteers in casework. This would, of course, require funding for training and staff time, but in the long-term, staff felt that it would have a positive impact on service delivery. Volunteers also felt that this would provide an excellent developmental opportunity, and create an improved sense of being a part of a community and something bigger. They highlighted how beneficial existing training had been beyond their role as a befriender.

“Opportunities for volunteers to get involved in other things going on at The Children’s Society is beneficial. It’s about feeling part of that community, that sense of shared commitment. I’m sure the opportunity is there, it’s just whether there’s more support that could be given to volunteers to capitalise on them… There’s lots of volunteers that want to support and get involved. I know there’s stuff going on in the participation team so is there opportunities here?” – Volunteer

“Integrating volunteers more into our day to day work. Currently, they’re quite separate from the main project. They work in isolation, out in the community. They are very beneficial, but there are ways of having more casework volunteer capacity. It’s possibly related to the time and resource it would take to setup and all of the resources that would need to be engaged in initial recruitment and training.” – Staff

Building on the desire to feel connected to a community, one volunteer also highlighted that they would value the opportunity to come together more with other volunteers nationally to share knowledge, experience and ideas.

“I’d also value linking up and that sense of connection to other volunteers across The Children’s Society nationally – that sharing of knowledge, experience, and ideas across regions and giving that sense of broader volunteerism and connectedness and civic identity.” – Volunteer
The Youth Group Service Model

It was highlighted that attendance has fluctuated at the youth group and there have, therefore, been discussions related to best use of resource. There was a feeling that a drop in would work well for the By Your Side service, and that there is evidence for this both elsewhere in the organisation, from services in the Midlands, and externally, from a drop in managed by Red Cross. It may be worth considering whether a different approach to the group work service model would achieve improved take up.

“Our group has been more challenging. It’s quite resource intensive and numbers attending have fluctuated. Sometimes they’re quite low. The volunteers are very committed and the group is beneficial, but we have talked a lot about attendance over time. There are other NGOs running groups with a higher take up, like Red Cross with 20-30 young people. We average about eight. Red Cross is drop-in open to anyone. Refugee Council also has a lively social group, but they have a greater pool to draw on. If they have 10 or 15 caseworkers, they have more young people around.” – Staff
Impact

The By Your Side service has built hope in the lives of young people who would have otherwise been alone, and living in circumstances detrimental to their wellbeing. By Your Side has built hope for young people through:

The service has improved outcomes for young people, and there were numerous examples given of how workers have worked holistically with young people to support them to find solutions to a range of barriers and challenges. Volunteer befrienders have built young people’s support networks and offered valuable support to caseworkers. They have supported young people to integrate into their new lives in London; encouraged and facilitated young people getting involved in positive activities; and had a positive impact on feelings of isolation, self-esteem and confidence. The youth group has offered the opportunity to socialise with other young people, and to escape from the everyday stresses and issues related to being a refugee and asylum seeking young person.

Volunteers have seen increased levels of life satisfaction and improved mental health and wellbeing through their role as a befriender. They have developed skills and confidence, and have gained a new perspective on life.

Partners highlighted the impact of the service on capacity in the sector, as well as in their organisations. The service has been responsible for upskilling other professionals and changing practice, as well as making systemic change through contributing to the work of central teams. By Your Side workers have been able to facilitate positive relationships between young people and other professionals, such as therapists or solicitors, and have added evidence to asylum and age dispute cases, thus increasing the likelihood of a positive outcome. Information sharing between By Your Side workers and other professionals has had a positive impact on both safety planning and engagement with young people, as well as understanding of capacity in the sector. With the support of a By Your Side worker, young people are positively contributing to their local communities and the economy, as they are more able to access education, training and employment, and consequently gaining qualifications and jobs.

The evaluation also highlighted the value of the service during Covid-19 pandemic. Partners noted that the existence of the service and their holistic service model has filled gaps created.
by Covid that would have otherwise had a significant impact on young people. The befriending service was also highlighted, in particular, as a vital lifeline to young people during the crisis.

**Learning**

There a number of critical success factors, which have facilitated the positive impacts that the service has had on young people, volunteers and local communities and systems. These are:

- Providing young people with a skilled and reliable practitioner
- Plugging gaps
- Working holistically and on a long-term basis
- An empowering approach
- In-house therapy offer
- Use of volunteers – and a well-managed volunteering service
- Specialist knowledge and skills across a cohesive staff team
- Setting boundaries and expectations
- Established networks and relationships
- Connection to central teams and other TCS services

There have also been a number of challenges for the service. These have included:

- The Covid-19 pandemic
- External environment
- Resources and capacity
- Funding and a secure future
- Managing boundaries

The evaluation has also identified three key opportunities for development of the service. Some of these opportunities would require further funding. Opportunities include:

- Working with other organisations to improve coordination in the sector
- Involving volunteers in casework
- Developing the youth group service model to provide a drop-in offer