





## Project facts

### *The Child's Best Interest during the Return Process*

**Project period:** 1 July 2017 - 31 Dec 2020

**Project Manager:** Elisabeth Lindholm (elisabeth.lindholm@stromsund.se)

**Sub-Project Managers:** Marie Lidberg (marie.lidberg@stromsund.se) and Joakim Selén (joakim.selen@migrationsverket.se)

**Project owner:** Strömsund Municipality

**Project partners:** The Swedish Migration Agency and the Jämtland County Administrative Board

**Target group:** Children without guardians during the asylum process or after refusal of entry but who have not yet returned to their home countries.

**Goal:** That the participants in this project gain improved competence and preconditions for local collaboration concerning children without guardians who are to be returned to their home countries.

**This project was co-financed by the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF).**

**atervandande@stromsund.se**  
**www.begripligt.nu**

## **Publications in the same series**

*Att samtala om asyl och återvändande (2020) [Talking about asylum and returning] (2020)*

*Samverkan för barnets bästa (2015, reviderad 2020) [Collaboration in the best interest of the child] (2015, revised 2020)*

*Att söka asyl - En interaktiv karta över asylprocessen (2015, reviderad 2020) [Applying for asylum - an interactive map of the asylum process] (2015, revised 2020)*

*Att söka asyl - En interaktiv karta över asylprocessen (2015, reviderad 2018) [Applying for asylum - an interactive map of the asylum process] (2015, revised 2018)*

*Att arbeta med återvändande ensamkommande - en modellbeskrivning (2015) (Working with returning unaccompanied minors - a model] (2015)*

*Samtal och dialog med barn i återvändandeprocess (2015) [Discussion and dialogue with children during their return process] (2015)*

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# Introduction

Strömsund's work with unaccompanied, asylum-seeking children began in 2014 when the Municipality initiated a preliminary study that resulted in the report *Mellan avslag och utvisning*<sup>1</sup> (Between Refusal and Expulsion). Since 2017, we have worked together with the Swedish Migration Agency and Jämtland County Administrative Board in the project titled *The Child's Best Interest during the Return Process*. The material we have previously produced has been revised and topped up with new knowledge and experience from the individuals we have met over the years, not least knowledge contributed by the children and all the adults who interacted with them.

Many people remember the large numbers of unaccompanied children who came to Sweden in 2015, how Sweden gathered its resources to receive all the asylum-seeking families, adults and the children who came without parents. In 2015, 163 000 people sought asylum in Sweden. 51 338 of them came from war-torn Syria. In 2014 and 2015, a total of just over 42 000 unaccompanied asylum-seeking children came to Sweden.

Most came to the country over the course of a couple of dramatic autumn months. As a result of the exceptionally large number of asylum seekers who came to Sweden and the rest of Europe, changes were implemented in both legislation and government practice. In 2015, Sweden was one of the EU countries that received most asylum seekers.

In the summer of 2016, temporary legislation was passed restricting the right to asylum. Sweden moved from having the EU's most generous asylum legislation to the EU minimum level. Through a series of measures, an attempt was made to "create breathing space for Swedish refugee reception"<sup>2</sup>.

There were also several new laws passed concerning the many unaccompanied children who sought asylum. Between 1 July and 30 September 2018, it was possible for young people to apply for a residence

## Refugee crisis in figures and legislation

**12 November 2015** - Temporary border checks.

**24 November 2015** - Decision on temporary residence permits.

**4 January 2016** - Temporary identity checks.

**1 March 2016** - Common responsibility for reception of newly-arrived migrants (2015/16:54).

**1 June 2016** - Changes to the Reception of Asylum-seekers etc. Act (LMA).

**20 July 2016** - New temporary legislation up until 20 July 2019.

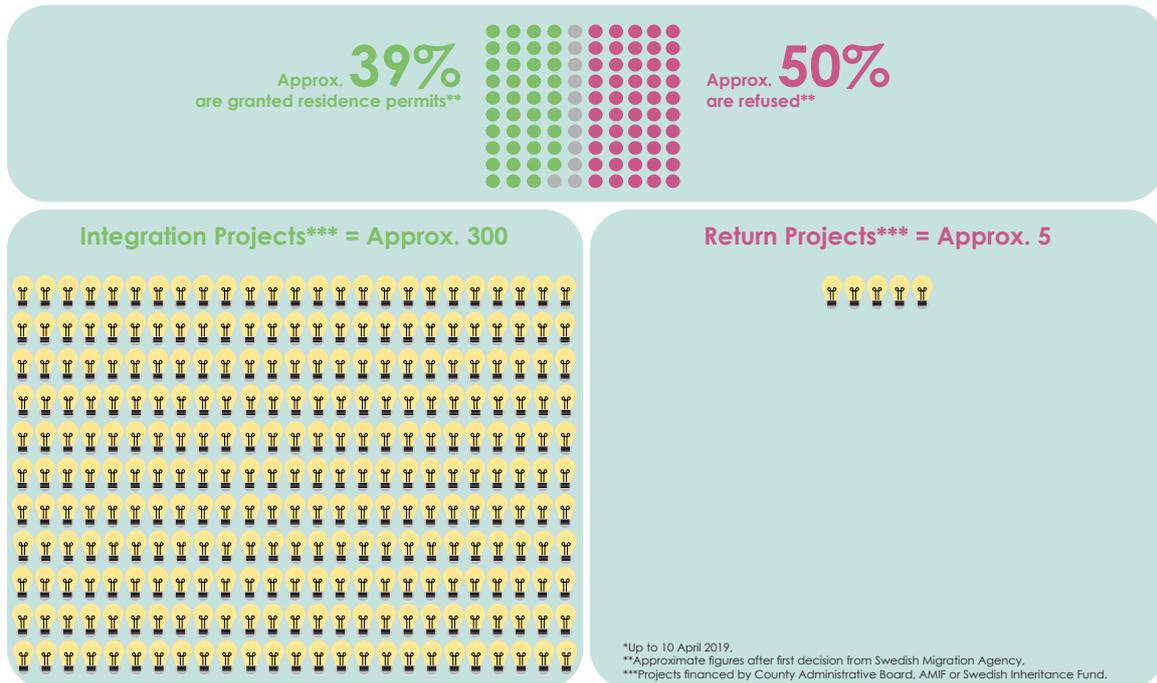
**July 2019** - Temporary legislation is prolonged until 19 July 2021.

permit for upper secondary studies despite their asylum application having been refused. The condition stated was that their asylum application had been submitted before 24 November 2015 and the individual concerned had waited more than 15 months for a decision. Those who were granted a residence permit for upper secondary school studies received a 13-month permit with the possibility of extension if certain requirements were met.

The issue of returning children who have had their asylum application refused still attracts commitment from many people. It often generates emotion and, sometimes, it is not always clear for whom the commitment fulfils a purpose. It becomes even more complex when faced with the fact that the right to asylum must be upheld, which means that in the event of a refusal of asylum application the child must leave the country.

<sup>1</sup> Emilsson Hedman, Gahlin, Källström and Näsström. *Mellan avslag och utvisning*. [Between Refusal and Expulsion] 2014  
<sup>2</sup> Prime Minister's Office, Article 24 Nov 2015

# 301 428 ASYLUM-SEEKING CHILDREN, 2002-2019\*



\*Up to 10 April 2019,

\*\*Approximate figures after first decision from Swedish Migration Agency,

\*\*\*Projects financed by County Administrative Board, AMIF or Swedish Inheritance Fund.<sup>3</sup>

The diagram shows the distribution of development efforts in Sweden targeting the two different groups – asylum-seekers who are permitted to stay and those who are not permitted to stay.

Despite the importance of this issue, our experience is that far fewer people than would be desirable wish to work on preparing these children for their possible return. The project has experienced that the interest in, and opportunities to, work on issues related to return have been scarce. One clear example of this is the number of projects approved for integration efforts in comparison to the number of projects linked to return issues.

In *The Child's Best Interest during the Return Process* Project, the focus is on increased quality in contacts with children who have or may have their asylum applications refused and thus be facing a return. Through information, conversation and collaboration and with a theoretical grounding in the emotion of the context, the STOP model and relational competence, we work actively with unaccompanied minors whose applications have been, or may be,

refused. This work is also permeated by the basic principles of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child as well as common ethical issues and positions. From day one of the asylum process we should be able to help these children get the most possible out of their waiting period and assist them to be able to deal constructively with future challenges - without us having all the answers to all their questions.

Not infrequently, the child has reached the age of 18 by the time the decision of approval or refusal comes. In these cases, it makes a great deal of difference to the individual if he or she was given the opportunity to prepare for what it means to undergo an asylum and return process as an adult. In order to increase the child's security, it is important that the information we provide is fact-based and linked to the role we have been allocated. We also need knowledge and understanding of the legislation that may mean that

3 Project *The Child's Best Interest during the Return Process* 2019

some children and young people actually do not show sufficient reason to stay in Sweden.

For those who have not been granted a permit and who have passed 18 and, for different reasons do not return, there is a high risk and a distinct probability that they will end up outside the social safety net. Being young and undocumented in a potential shadow economy with the risks that this position entails is a difficult situation. Too often we find young adults in criminal, and in other types of vulnerable, contexts where the lack of both human rights and safe adults as protective factors is very real. Such a scenario cannot be considered to be better than a planned, well-prepared return using the financial and societal support inputs that are available to children. Our experience is also that there is usually some form of family or relatives who could meet the returning child, even if the child has stated that they have no network.

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child does not cease to apply to an unaccompanied minor who has had his or her asylum application refused and is thus also facing return. In order for a child's rights to be fulfilled, all the adults around the child must meet their obligations, regardless of how they assess a decision or a specific situation. The need to provide support for each individual child based on the child's unique situation applies not only in the case of a residence permit of some kind, but also in the event of a return.

The consequences of not preparing these children very early in the asylum process for the fact that their asylum application may either be approved or refused generates distrust of the adult world once the outcome is confirmed. This is because the adult world has not done its duty as concerns information and clarity.

It is very important that we are able to shift our perspective and focus on the consequences that the individual child faces if we do not fulfil our task. We also need to act from the perspective of children's rights and the Convention on the Rights of the Child as presented in legislation. Children have the right to correct information and are in need of safe adults as protection factors in an otherwise vulnerable situation.

*The Child's Best Interest during the Return Process* Project has placed great emphasis on motivating actors and activities to touch on the issue by making visible and clarifying the nature of the work i.e. this concerns working with the best interests of the child in focus, not advocating for unaccompanied children to return.

### **Government agencies and NGOs who have participated in the Project Reference Group:**

Swedish Ombudsman for Children  
Stockholm County Administrative Board  
Swedish Migration Agency, Unit for Return Coordination  
Police Authority (NOA)  
Save the Children Sweden  
Swedish Red Cross  
Swedish National Agency for Education  
Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions  
Swedish National Board of Health and Welfare  
Church of Sweden  
UNHCR  
UNICEF

*Ensamkommandes Förbund (The Association of Unaccompanied Refugee Children) was invited to be part of the Project Reference Group but declined.*

We also need to act from the perspective of children's rights and the Convention on the Rights of the Child as presented in legislation. The Project's work uses the basic principles of the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the common ethical issues and positions that apply when considering the best interests of the child during the asylum and return process for unaccompanied children. The issue touches the emotions and engages people and the return of children is a complex issue. The project has therefore invited a broad representation from civil society and, in particular relevant government agencies, to participate in its Reference Group. The Reference Group has played an important part in the development and adaptation of measures and working methods based on the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child as legislation and the issue of unaccompanied children in the asylum and return process.

When the project began its work in 2017 in the form of regular meetings with coordinators and participants from pilot municipalities, conferences were also held in which both professional actors and volunteers were invited to participate. Interest was great, but we were also met with doubt. It was clear that the issue of unaccompanied children in the asylum process who are facing possible refusal and return aroused strong feelings and opinions.

Some conference participants presented themselves as both professionals and, at the same time, driving forces in networks aimed at, for example, stopping the return of children. We also experienced conference participants leaving the room crying when we talked about children having their applications refused and giving them the opportunity to prepare for this fact. The project has had to answer the question which has been asked more than once during conferences, training inputs or meetings with individuals i.e. how many children have we sent back. The answer, of course, is that it is vital that every child be met with correct information, empathy, competence and compassion. The focus of the project has not been the return itself, but children's needs and rights and to support and develop good-quality working methods around these children.

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*“Nobody ever says ‘well done’  
when a child returns.”*

Employee, Swedish Migration Agency

The resistance shown by civil society as concerns working with this issue may perhaps partly be explained by a fear of being questioned about their mission if they were to collaborate on issues concerning a child's return process. In the initial phase, the project experienced that the Swedish Migration Agency was, in many contexts, regarded by other actors as an opponent in their work with unaccompanied children. Being connected in any way with the Swedish Migration Agency could risk being accused of responsibility

for the increased return of unaccompanied children. Such signals naturally complicate both the interaction with, and opportunities to, support the child.

“

*There has been a lot of anger directed at the Swedish Migration Agency, but we as a municipality also bear responsibility. The Swedish Migration Agency has shown a more understanding side and throughout the project has talked about what actually applies, for example, safeguarding the right to asylum and who is responsible for what and together we have reasoned about the issues in which we need to find common ground.”*

Interview with Project Coordinator

Marie Andersson,

Jönköping Municipality.

Our message is that we need to comply with current legislation and decisions, and that as safe adults we must act as protective factors for these children. We also need to understand that the relationship is not, and never can be, equal. The child is in a dependent position as concerns us. If the child had not needed support and help, our paths might never have crossed. Our mission is to support the child in creating the best preconditions possible in the situation he or she is in, with the needs of the individual child centre stage.

Our aim is also to help the child gain and maintain a sense of context and facilitate for him/her to experience everyday life and the period waiting for information as meaningful and important. The child must gain a clear sense of context and understand that this is preparation for the future. Regular routines, including studies and leisure-time activities together with peers, educators and secure adults provide a sense of meaning which assists mental health and cognitive development, and physical health. All this without us having answers to all their questions and without being able to promise anything.

With child rights and children's perspectives in focus, we are also obliged to provide children with correct information. We know that access to correct information paves the way for the opportunity to think in new paths even before, but also after a (negative) decision. Children are entitled to honest, open and safe adults and to be asked early in the asylum process "What will you do if you do not receive a residence permit"? When we prepare the child early on for a possible return, we also drastically reduce the risk of prolonged shock reactions on the day such a decision is received. The adult world is obliged to equip the child as far as possible with facts and tools so that he/she can manage any outcome/decision the best possible manner. Each person is more or less resistant to change and not least when it comes to children, we know that preparations, both large-scale and detailed, affect the child's experience in a positive manner.

We have noted that all the actors need to agree on certain issues before cooperation can function properly, these include when the asylum process begins and ends and when the return work begins and ends. At first, these questions may sound banal and that there are obvious answers. However, it is not unusual - for us to meet different groups and spend a lot of time trying to reach agreement on these issues. Does the asylum process begin before the child arrives in Sweden? Does the return process only begin after a final asylum refusal notice has been issued? Our view is that the asylum process begins when the child comes to Sweden and seeks asylum. We also believe that the return process is part of the asylum process. The work carried out within the framework of municipal and state activities is completed when the child has left the country. Public authorities cannot act freely in other countries as NGOs perhaps can.

As professionals or volunteers, it is also important for both our own sakes and for the sake of the child, that we are aware of where our role begins and ends. In order to be able to keep the child's needs, and not our own, in focus there must be a certain measure of professionalism in our work. Our behaviour should always show empathy and a genuine warmth and interest in the child, but as soon as we allow sympathy to creep in, we have lost client focus and begun to act based on our own feelings instead. So when we work with ourselves as a tool, we need to make sure we

know for whose sake and with whose needs in focus we are working.

The issue of unaccompanied children in the return process is current and important not only in Sweden, but also throughout Europe. Our wish is that inspiration, as well as the useful tools and method support we have developed, can be found in this material - in the best interests of the child.



*Illustration by Catrina Norman Tengroth*

# Theoretical basis and method

## The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child

According to this UN Convention, the best interests of the child must be a primary consideration in all actions concerning them, whether these actions are taken by public or private social welfare institutions, courts, administrative authorities or legislative bodies<sup>4</sup>. This UN Convention has been of great importance to the project and has, in a natural manner, also contributed to the weight of our work and working methods, purpose and goals. The Convention on the Rights of the Child was adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1989 and is a legally-binding document on all the 195 countries that have ratified it. The Convention consists of a large number of articles, four of which are the basic principles for how children's rights should be interpreted:

§ 2 All children have the same rights and equal value.

§ 3 The best interest of the child shall be taken into account in all decisions concerning them.

§ 6 All children have the right to life and development.

§12 All children have the right to express their opinion and have it respected.

The Convention on the Rights of the Child has been statutory in Sweden since 1 January 2020. Its principles must permeate the whole of society and it forms one of the guiding conventions both as concerns the Aliens Act (2005:716), against which the child's application for a residence permit is examined, and the Social Services Act (2001:453) which governs work with unaccompanied children from a municipal point of view.

Collaboration between the various actors involved in the national return process is also important in order to be able to fulfil the Convention at a good level of quality. In order to remedy shortcomings in the

return process for children without guardians, it is important that actors other than the Swedish Migration Agency are involved. We consider that actors at the local level, and especially the municipalities, have a considerable role to play here.

## BBIC

Another document that currently forms the foundation of work at municipal level in most Swedish municipalities is the licensing tool Children's Needs in Focus (BBIC), which is a system of case processing in child care cases and a measuring instrument of the individual child's development and health. BBIC is based on a number of basic principles where the child's needs and best interests are paramount.<sup>5</sup>

In the project, we have taken note of BBIC basic principles in our efforts to improve the work with the target group of unaccompanied children in the asylum and return process. We have achieved this with quality development in focus both for the target group itself and for the actors and professionals around the child.

## Sense of context

Aaron Antonovsky approached his theories on sense of context from a salutogenic perspective, that is taking hold of the healthy, wellbeing-promoting parts of a human being and strengthening them. In his studies of the reasons why people, despite very difficult conditions as perceived from the outside, still succeed in feeling good in their lives, he identified three crucial factors<sup>6</sup>:

*Comprehensibility* - if we experience that what is happening around us is possible to understand.

*Manageability* - if we feel that we have the resources to deal with adversity in life, for example that we have coped with tough events before or that we have secure people around us who will help when life becomes difficult.

4 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child

5 Swedish National Board of Health and Welfare BBIC, 2013

6 *Att arbeta med återvändande ensamkommande* [Working with returning unaccompanied minors] Strömsund Municipality, 2015

*Meaningfulness* - if we feel that our life consists of aspects that provide valuable content and meaning.

These three factors interact and reinforce each other. Our sense of context can also develop over time<sup>7</sup>. With the right support from the adult world, children in the return process can be helped to understand their situation better and identify resources to deal with what feels difficult, both here and now and in the future. Adults can help them gain insight into the fact that life can be meaningful even though everything has not turned out as planned. Efforts to improve the children's sense of context run throughout our work.

### **Relationship competence**

Relationship competence is an approach that aims at "seeing" the individual child according to his/her own preconditions. Based on this, adults must adapt their own behaviour without renouncing leadership and, as the professional, possess the ability and willingness to take full responsibility for the quality of the relationship.<sup>8</sup>

This is an important factor to take into account and observe when working with every child, and not least in the work with children without guardians where safe adults play a vital role.

By practicing being present in the meeting and seeing what the child really wants to say in different situations, the professional can expand his or her ability for empathetic, constructive response. During interaction, basic needs concerning feeling valuable and appreciated must be met, without the child being allowed to take over leadership and control the situation. Any message consists of two main elements, namely what is said and how it is said. Although content is of great importance, the process part, how the content is conveyed, also plays a decisive role.

This approach permeates the project's thoughts on the preconditions for good discussions, both with the individual child and within and between different activities. We therefore believe that good relationships are the basis of being able to inform the child

about the asylum and return process, of holding good discussions and of establishing functioning collaboration around the child.

### **The STOP Model**

The STOP Model emerged during work with children in the war-torn Lebanon of the 80s. STOP is based on a salutogenic perspective i.e. the importance of seeing the healthy parts of each child and trying to strengthen them.

The model is primarily intended as a tool for people who meet these children in their work. The principles are theoretically simple and fulfil a function for all the children in this modern, stressful world. At the same time, it becomes especially important to remember the rules when the child's existence is otherwise chaotic, for children in crisis.<sup>9</sup>

*Structure.* Ensure the days possess structure and content by building on the good routines that already exist and showing clear leadership. Everyday life needs to be predictable, for example using clear schedules and meaningful daily employment. By having access to clearly-stated information of the correct amount, uncertainty decreases and it becomes easier to feel in control of the situation and consequently feel good. Maintaining existing, important rituals can also help the child.

*Talking and time.* Allowing the child gain all the information that is possible based on their maturity, listening to the child on the child's terms and giving them the opportunity to express themselves in their own way. If it is possible for an individual to put into words and get help to carry what is difficult, it will be easier to move forward. Children need adults who listen and find ways for them to express themselves. Some experience difficulty in using their words so other ways of expressing their feelings and thoughts, such as through painting or drama, may be easier. Talking both about what has been but also getting help to move on and talk about the future strengthens the child's sense of context. The important thing is to be met by adults who signal that there is time to talk and that they have an understanding of the situation.

7 Iwarsson. *Samtal med barn och ungdomar* [Discussions with children and young people] 2007

8 *Att arbeta med återvändande ensamkommande* [Working with returning unaccompanied minors] Strömsund Municipality, 2015

9 Elmeroth & Häge, *Flyktens barn* [Children of flight] 2009



Illustration by Catrina Norman Tengroth

*Organised play.* Helping the children break their confusion and paralysis through meaningful activities with adult support when necessary is essential. Take advantage of the energy that is found in initiatives against injustice and support the children in making their voices heard. For children who have been through difficult events, play may easily become destructive if they do not receive support in dealing with what comes up during their play enabling them to move on. Play can sometimes work to help processing, but ordinary games and physical activity and having fun whenever possible are just as important.

*Parental support.* Whenever possible, give parents support in being parents, make them participants in the activities around the child and support initiatives for collaboration with parents and between parents. Even parents who are in difficulties are experts on their children and their knowledge and opinions need to be utilised. In that they are an important part of the child's past, they are also an important piece of the child's identity development.

The healing function of the STOP model may be regarded as a prerequisite for being able to create a sense of context for children who are in a chaotic situation. The four components should therefore permeate the everyday life of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children<sup>10</sup>.

### **Motivational Interviews**

Motivational Interviews (MI) is a conversational method used in counselling and treatment to facilitate change processes. The method was developed during the 1980s and 1990s and is currently in general use in counselling and treatment in areas such as health and medical care, prisons, social services, psychiatry and not least in schools.<sup>11</sup>

MI as a method is based on the individual's strengths and desires with its focus on finding and strengthening the individual's driving force to move forward in a process of change.

In the work with children without guardians who are in the asylum process or facing possible return, our experience is that the method provides valuable sup-

10 Att arbeta med återvändande ensamkommande, [Working with returning unaccompanied minors] Strömsund Municipality, 2015  
11 Farbring/Rollnick, *MI for practitioners: support and guidance for Motivational Interviewing* 2015

port in the strengthening of the individual, despite their difficult life situations. Through conversations using MI, the children can be supported in rediscovering their own strengths and also, in a simple manner, talk about and clarify what the next step should be or may mean. This naturally strengthens the child's sense of context and of actually having the opportunity to be at the centre of and own his or her process. The focus is always on the child's needs and desires, both in the moment and also from a long-term perspective going forward as alternative target images become an important part of the conversation. Active listening clarifies how best to guide the child in the direction of the future.

### Quality development

In all our project work we have taken note of the PDSA wheel, - plan, do, study, act - which is a cycle of improvement that is commonly-used today in many businesses and organisations. This and other management tools used in the quality development area have formed the basis of our view of collaboration and the process-oriented methodological support and working methods we applied in order to be able to develop and improve existing collaboration structures.

Quality development brings continuous improvements in terms of quality before, during and after a process of some kind. The foundation of quality development work depends on the organisation or operational management enabling and prioritising this working method.<sup>12</sup>

This is a vitally important element for us, as our experience is that quality development is essential at organisational, operational and individual levels in order for consensus on the best interests of the child to be possible and achievable.

Despite this, actors and activities around the unaccompanied children target group may have been given much fewer opportunities for quality development work than in other activities that focus on children and young people. We believe that this is mainly due to the major changes in activities that have been underway since 2015. From a longer perspective, it will of course be unsustainable to regard this as a rea-

son not to work with quality development in the field, but we possess considerable understanding of how the situation was when refugee reception was at its highest level.

### Development ecology

The Development Ecology Systems Theory<sup>13</sup> was developed by the Russian-American cultural and development psychologist Urie Bronfenbrenner. The theory describes the interplay between human beings' innate qualities and the environments in which they live. Human development thus takes place in interaction with the environment and its preconditions.

Based on Bronfenbrenner's Developmental Ecology Theory, our model highlights the hub around the child as concerns important influencing factors for the development of unaccompanied children and young people in Swedish society who are, in addition, experiencing an uncertain outcome concerning their stay in the country. This model has also taken into account the children's own opinions about what affects them and their experiences of being introduced into Swedish society at the same time as being affected by the asylum and return process.

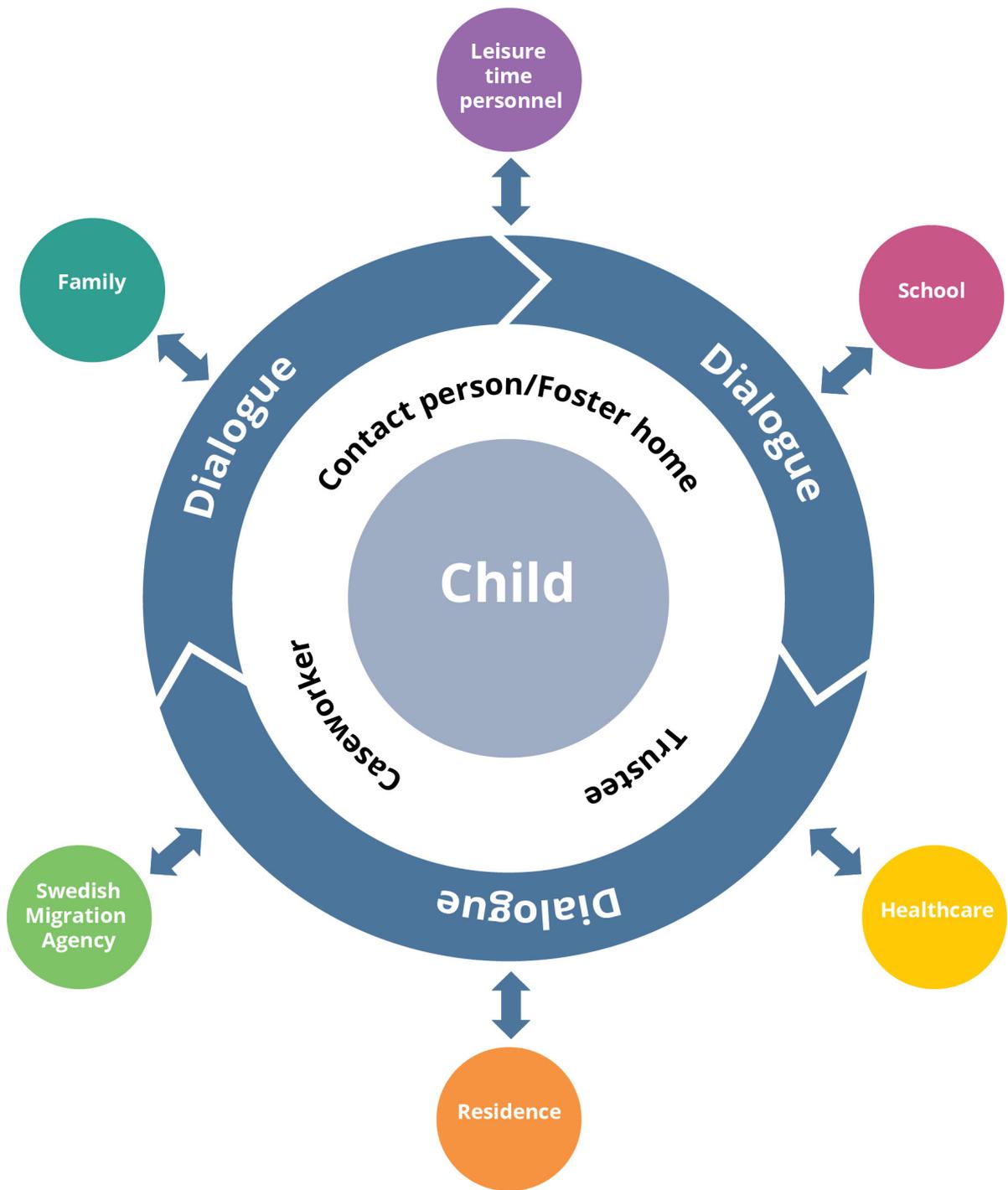
Depending on your role or relationship to the individual child, influencing factors are considered to possess different levels of importance.

While one actor may consider schooling and passing subjects to be the strongest positive influencing factor for the child, another actor in the child's sphere may perceive leisure time and friends as the strongest. We have chosen to define the hub around the child as we see it based on the Developmental Ecology Systems Theory.

Adults in the child's network can be helped by beginning from a developmental ecological perspective, without forgetting to take the child's own experience into account. As a result, the child can stay in focus during their journey and development. Adults top up their knowledge and then meet the child where he or she is and provide support when necessary.

12 Samverkan för barnets bästa [Collaboration in the best Interest of the child] Strömsund Municipality, 2020

13 Bronfenbrenner, *The ecology of human development*, 1979 & Bronfenbrenner, *Making human beings human*, 2004



*Social worker, contact person/foster home and trustee are the three actors who form the hub around the child.*

# Background

## From pre-study to Child's Best Interest during the Return Process

Strömsund Municipality's work with unaccompanied, asylum-seeking children whose applications for asylum had been refused began in 2014.

*The Return of Unaccompanied Minors Project and The Best Interest of the Child during the Return Process Project* were both preceded by the same pre-study, the results of which are compiled in the report *Mellan avslag och utvisning* (Between Refusal and Expulsion)<sup>14</sup>.

The data for the report was collected with the help of a regional and a national survey, as well as through interview surveys with unaccompanied children and professionals. The answers helped to provide a current picture of the situation for the children who had had their application for residence permit refused.

The interviews, with the children in question and with the municipal actors who play a central role in these children's lives, provided an in-depth picture of the local and regional operations that were underway for the children.

The pre-study showed that routines and working methods for assisting unaccompanied children had been developed up to the point when they received a refusal notice. Local preconditions are often a reason why working methods may differ across the country, which means that all measures cannot be implemented in the same way in all municipalities. In the pre-study, several children expressed that they did not feel that they were seen after they received their refusals. Actors described that they felt lost and lacked routines for work after refusal. Many described uncertainty about what actually happens in the event of a refusal, legally as well as with the child's state of mind and how you, as an adult, can deal with the situation.

The pre-study also showed a lack of communication about the refusal notice and difficulties in relating professionally to the decision the child had received.

From the social services' point of view, the child's planning was seldom adapted to the new preconditions and the trustees often experienced loneliness in their role.

All in all, in the material collected by the pre-study, there were many good examples of well-functioning routines for working with this target group at different stages. At the same time, there were also various knowledge gaps in all the municipalities, shortcomings as concerns clear routines but also good opportunities for improving working methods.

The study produced general guidelines and recommendations, which were considered important in the work with children in the return process:

- common knowledge platform
- forum for discussion and dialogue
- guidance for trustees
- well-developed collaboration
- reflections concerning confidentiality
- crisis management plan
- developing activities with children waiting to return
- reflections on ethics

The implementation project *Return of Unaccompanied Minors* was then based on these recommendations and Strömsund Municipality worked to develop tools, administrative and working methods to create improved preconditions for unaccompanied children in Sweden.

With the increased level of unaccompanied minor reception in 2015, considerable demand from other municipalities and actors arose as they wished to learn about our experiences and gain practical tools. This eventually led to thoughts about further development of the material.

We saw that there was a national need for support and methods in the work with children without guardians in the asylum and return process. The model from the

14 Emilsson Hedman, Gahlin, Källström and Näsström. *Mellan avslag och utvisning*. [Between refusal and expulsion]

implementation project *Return of Unaccompanied Minors* was an attempt to structure how the work with this target group should be conducted, however thoughts were triggered as concerns further developing and updating the model.

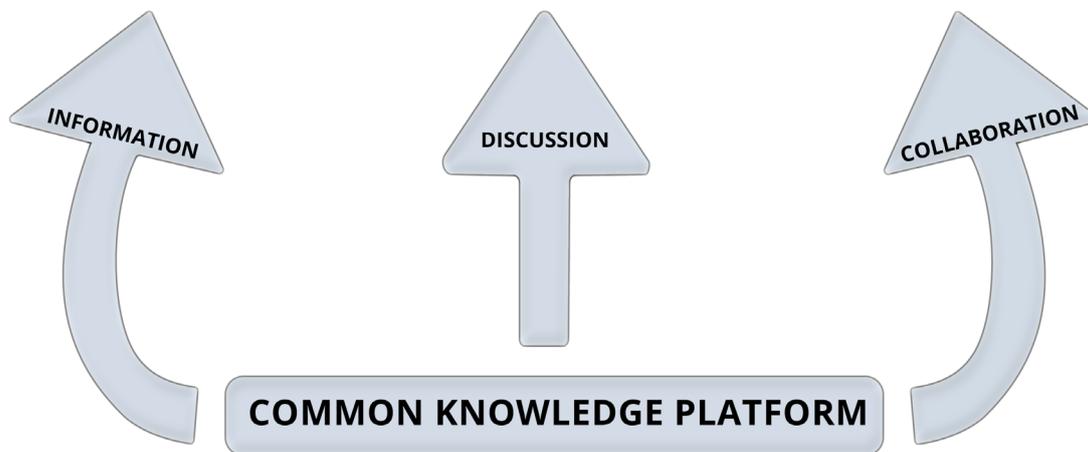
*The Return of Unaccompanied Minors* was based on three development areas that resulted in one tool and two guides which are presented in separate annexes:

1. The tool *Att söka asyl - en interaktiv karta över asylprocessen* (Applying for asylum - an interactive map of the asylum process)
2. *Handledning för Samtal och dialog* (Guide for Discussion and Dialogue)
3. *Handledning för Samverkan* (Guide for Collaboration)

The model was based on information, discussions and collaboration using our common knowledge platform as a basis. It aimed at preparing, strengthening and equipping the children for different possible future scenarios by supporting them in identifying and building up different alternative goals.

*The Best Interest of the Child during the Return Process* has thus further developed and updated existing material from the two previous projects, as well as developing completely new materials and methodological support as a natural part of quality development. This has been carried out in cooperation with the pilot municipalities and, not least, with the Swedish Migration Agency as a project partner and expert function concerning the asylum and return process.

## ALTERNATIVE GOAL IMAGES



**Model for work with unaccompanied minors. *The Child's Best Interest during the Return Process* 2019.**

# Project Description

## *The Child's Best Interest during the Return Process*

### Project goals

That the participants in this project gain improved competence and better preconditions for local collaboration concerning children without guardians who are to be returned to their home countries. In order to achieve the project goal and work with learning and dissemination of project results, the following sub-goals must be achieved:

**Sub-goal 1.** Competence-enhancing initiatives have been implemented for project participants.

**Sub-goal 2.** A locally-adapted collaboration model based on the Strömsund Model has been developed and implemented in participating municipalities.

**Sub-goal 3.** Project experience and results have been disseminated to other actors.

**Sub-goal 4.** The participants in the pilot municipalities feel that they have gained increased competence and improved preconditions for local collaboration and collaboration with the Swedish Migration Agency on issues concerning children without guardians who are to return to their home country.

The project was expected to exert effects in the form of:

- increased focus on the child's needs during the return process
- improved quality and efficiency in the return process
- increased predictability for children who are to return
- improved understanding of the return process

Preparing pilot municipalities for better collaboration with the Swedish Migration Agency was initially a higher priority than local collaboration. A considerable amount of activity also concerned consolidating reasonable expectations of cooperation with a state authority, mainly on the basis that municipal and state tasks often differ and may result in different mandates.

Through this project, the collaborators at the Swedish Migration Agency, pilot municipalities and participants in conferences and workshops in which the project participated were given the opportunity to obtain practical, correct first hand information on how the agency works with this target group and the procedures and regulations regarding asylum case investigations of children without guardians.

The hope was that the project could help to bridge the gap that was then experienced between the state authority and the municipalities, in order to make the process easier for both the individual child as well as those who meet and work with these children in the long term.

Returning is a challenge for many of the actors involved, not least the municipalities. As the actors involved may provide different information, different treatment and spread false hopes during an ongoing return process, the Swedish Migration Agency also finds it difficult to take into account the child's best interests in this context. In addition, there has been a period of several legal changes and amendments in the area that have made it difficult to understand the process, especially for a child and from a return perspective.

The asylum process for children without guardians is a responsibility that is shared between different actors. However, the primary actors are the Swedish Migration Agency and the municipalities. Although the Swedish Migration Agency bears overall responsibility for this process, they actually meet the children to a very limited extent as compared to actors in municipal operations. However, many municipal actors have very little knowledge of the preconditions for children in the return process.

*The Best Interest of the Child during the Return Process* is not about the quantity of returns, it is about ensuring a higher quality in contacts and work with children without guardians who seek asylum in Sweden and thus also face a possible return.

The reality we need to relate to is current legislation and to understand that far from all the children seeking asylum in Sweden have grounds for their applications. This in itself means that we need to take responsibility for the fact that a return scenario may become relevant, and that we thus need to prepare the individual child for different outcomes early in the asylum process.

Focus has therefore been on strengthening/supporting the target group and participating municipalities and actors in a number of different ways based on the needs of both individuals and operations.

We have strived to meet the needs expressed in a pedagogical manner by offering competence development, methods and models.

In order to improve the situation of unaccompanied children who are expected to return, initiatives that strengthen the actors and professional groups that are closest to the child during the return process are essential.

All the adults around the child must comply with Swedish Migration Agency decisions. We assume that all the actors work on the basis of what they consider to be the best interests of the child. However, different perceptions of what the child's best is may lead to efforts being made - or not being made - that vary or sometimes conflict with each other. In order to create security and trust, adults around the child need to give clear signals about what applies when it comes to, for example, roles and responsibilities or legislation and regulations.

Consequently, driving forces and motives, preconditions and forms of collaboration also form an important part of our work.

The project has developed a ladder in support of collaboration work. The steps may form a basis for discussion when it comes to collaboration in the best interests of the child in an asylum and return process. It may, for example, be used to identify how current collaboration works, clarify the need for collaboration, make the expectations of different actors visible



*The collaboration ladder developed in the project can help to identify how current collaboration works.*

or define the step collaboration on different issues needs to be located on.

In order to increase the child's security, it is important that the information we provide is fact-based and emanates from the role we have been allocated. We also need knowledge and understanding based on legislation that may mean that there are children and young people who actually do not show sufficient reason to stay in Sweden.

Based on new legislation, the project has updated its asylum map and accompanying guide so that it may function as a useful tool for the country's municipalities.

### **Central inputs within the project:**

- competence development for employees and trustees
- information to the child immediately after arrival in the municipality to provide a sense of context, support in thinking about the idea of refusal, find ways to identify what will happen and what they will do if there is a refusal and what this may mean
- information, discussions and dialogue after refusal to identify alternative goal images, get past catastrophic thinking and see other possible exits and opportunities to move forward
- collaboration tools for those who work around the child

In addition to disseminating knowledge and experience nationally, the project has also worked to support municipalities and NGOs in their work, through a support office in Strömsund. Efforts at the municipal level have been adapted to local preconditions and needs.

Inputs have focused on meeting staff at residential housing, trustees, student health teams and school staff, social services staff and committed representatives from civil society. The project has also served as a support function during the process of developing a local collaboration model in each participating municipality. As the Convention on the Rights of the Child has become law, it has been natural to use it as a basis for strengthening the child-rights perspective, the children's perspective and the individual child's perspective.

Extensive knowledge is required at most levels and in different areas such as the asylum process in which return is a natural part, BBIC, knowledge of the organisation's own opportunities and limitations, how their own municipality or region has chosen to organise and work with the reception of children without guardians.

It is also about working with yourself as a tool in your encounters with children who are going through a difficult process. Having the individual child's needs and best interests in focus requires good levels of self-knowledge and the ability to work in empathy,

### **During the project period, based on project purpose and goals, the following indicators have been identified:**

- 1061 unique individuals have participated in educational inputs (goal 1000)
- 61 courses (goal 60)
- 592 participants in regional conferences (goal 600)
- 34 external conferences (goal 30), of which 7 abroad
- 9 local collaboration models and a Jämtland County Joint Model for use in 8 municipalities (goal 15)



*Illustration by Catrina Norman Tengroth*

which does not turn into sympathy, when your values may clash with your task.

For the sake of the child, we must optimise our own work but also collaborate with all the other actors in the individual child's network as effectively as possible.

In *The Child's Best Interest during the Return Process*, we have been responsive to the needs of the municipalities and taken advantage of views and requests to provide competence development for employees and trustees. In order to maintain the highest possible standard and quality, we chose to combine our own qualifications with external educators in order to, as far as possible, provide participating municipalities with leading edge competence in each area. As a

result, implementation of new working methods has also been facilitated.

For example, when the child's network practice is to inform him/her about the asylum and return process at an early stage, it becomes more natural and easier to talk about alternative goal images in the event of a refusal.

Orderly collaboration between all the actors promotes and maintains the BBIC structure with the child in focus, while at the same time simplifying and clarifying the task in its entirety.

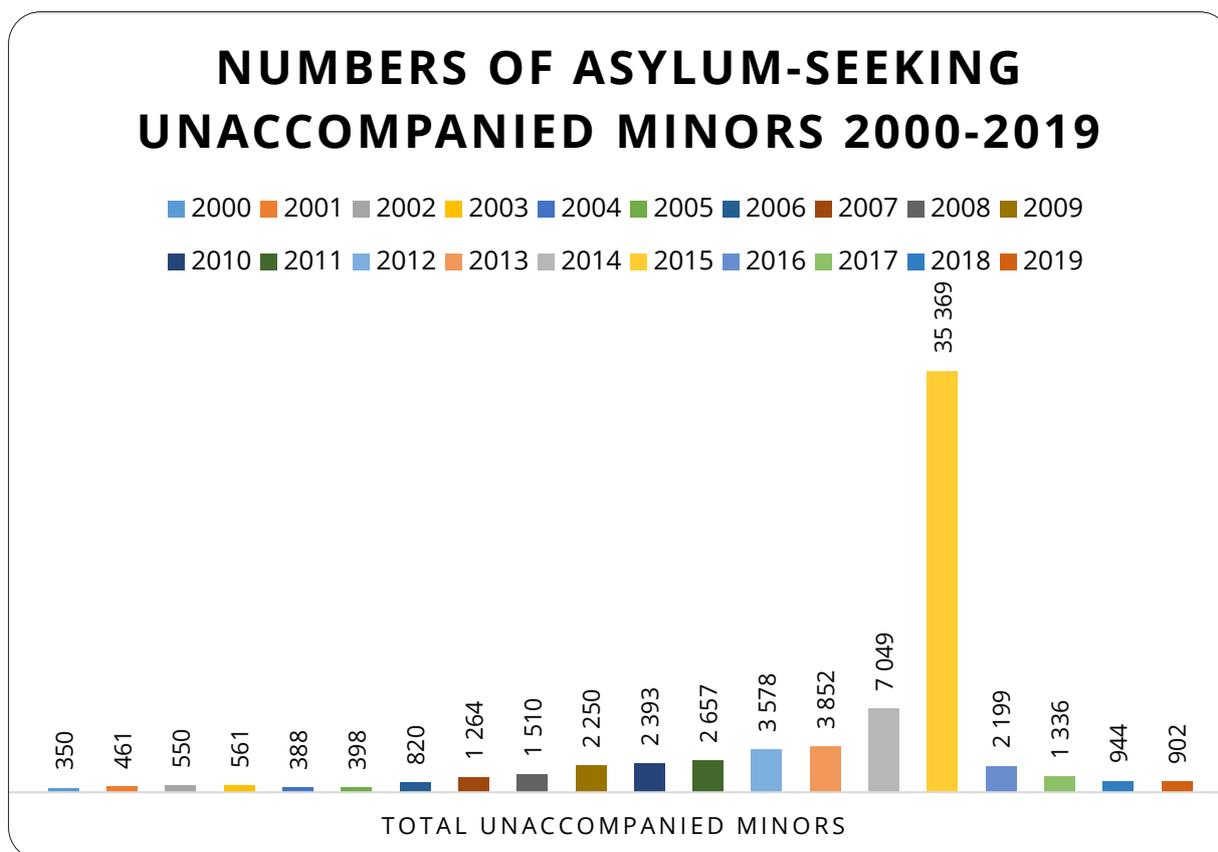
# Preconditions for project operations over time

From having to work intensively with the drastically increased reception of minors without guardians in many of the country’s municipalities, the number of arrivals has decreased just as quickly.

Between 2000-2019, a total of 68 831 unaccompanied asylum-seeking children came to Sweden. *The Child’s Best Interest during the Return Process* Project has been implemented in an ever-changing world, where we have had to adapt the project and our working methods to prevailing circumstances, not only in Sweden but also in the world and over a period when migration policy swung rapidly from open arms to very limited in just a few years. The debate on how orderly reception with the right competences and prerequisites should take place was also surrounded by questions about whether Sweden possessed

the capacity to provide an orderly reception based on the influx of refugees as other, much larger, nations in Europe chose to severely limit reception.

The number of asylum seekers in 2014-2015 meant that previous legislation regarding municipal reception of asylum-seeking children without guardians was not sufficient. The legislation was changed and all the municipalities in Sweden had to do their part in reception. The number of new arrivals in the target group drastically decreased after 2015. Despite this, and the fact that the level today is the lowest since the millennium, the forecast is still that 500 children without guardians will have sought asylum in Sweden by the end of 2020.



Source: The Swedish Migration Agency

This has, of course, brought massive changes at a furious pace for all host municipalities. Over the course of a few years, we have gone from starting up countless residential housing and mass-recruiting staff for such activities, teachers for language introduction programs, social workers and trustees to name but a few, to dismantling operations and making employees redundant.

It has also meant immense pressure on competence development, in which professional actors have had to perform using a large portion of confidence and patience as opportunities for competence development were assigned a lower priority in favour of just making it through the day. That said, we do not mean that this has been a general scenario however, it is a reasonable assumption since most municipalities and actors have described this scenario. As the daily activities and their routines began to flow, more focus was placed on competence development for staff and the development of pedagogical activities. Here, the project and our methodological support for talking to the target group about asylum and refusal of applications exerted a natural impact as the Swedish Migration Agency began to catch up with the asylum case studies and children began to be informed of decisions.

Of course, during this period the project has also adapted its operations to prevailing situations and circumstances, not least when it comes to collaboration. All parties have also had to focus on regarding each participating municipality's collaboration model as a contingency plan for the future.

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*”In addition, it is clear that working with returns is considered and treated as a low-status function by the authorities that are responsible for these issues.”*

Those who are not allowed to stay - implementing return policy, the Delegation for Migration Studies Report 2020:1

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*“The project has been unique in its way of working on the issues and has still succeeded in maintaining relevance, despite markedly changed conditions.”*

Project evaluation,  
Final Conference, 24 Sept 2020.

A large part of the work has been to support the municipalities in their contingency thinking, and to motivate collaboration on the basis of this, in spite of the ongoing dismantling of operations during which time and personnel resources have been severely limited. Also, from an equivalence perspective, a contingency plan with clear guidelines on how collaboration should work is very important; reception should work smoothly and predictably regardless of whether it concerns a single child or larger numbers.

One issue that is particularly important in this context as such major changes have taken place in a short period of time is that all operations must base their routines and continuous knowledge transfer on function and not on person. Operational knowledge base and experience should not be lost because staff leave.

By adapting initiatives and working methods and changing initiatives and support materials based on the expressed needs of participating municipalities, the project has worked to achieve long-term, sustainable results.

## The new Upper Secondary Studies Act

In 2018, young people who had had their asylum application refused and who had turned 18 during the waiting period were permitted to apply for a residence permit for studies at upper secondary level. As a result, 11 745 young adults applied for a residence permit within the framework of the upper secondary school legislation. Most of these applications were from children or young adults who had arrived as unaccompanied minors.

These new provisions, known as the new Upper Secondary School Act (NGL), meant that individuals who had received, or would otherwise have received, a refusal could obtain a residence permit for studies at upper secondary level if they met certain other requirements.

Although the new Upper Secondary School Act cannot be said to define unaccompanied children as its primary target group, for many, but not all, of the unaccompanied children who had had their asylum application refused, this has meant that their return has been postponed. Prior to the creation of the NGL, there was clarity for both the target group (unaccompanied children) and the actors involved as to when and where the legal process regarding asylum ended. This legislation created a lack of clarity and a sort of gap as a refusal of asylum application in fact no longer had to mean a subsequent return.

“The asylum process contains many different tracks and possibilities that send signals throughout the system that a no is not always a no.”<sup>15</sup>

The new Upper Secondary School Act was added in 2018 but has become part of the general and political debate on unaccompanied, asylum-seeking children since the refugee situation in 2015. In addition to this new act, the debate has also been characterised by a discourse on changes to legislation in several areas, long processing times, entry checks, medical age assessments, lack of resources for reception and possible amnesty.

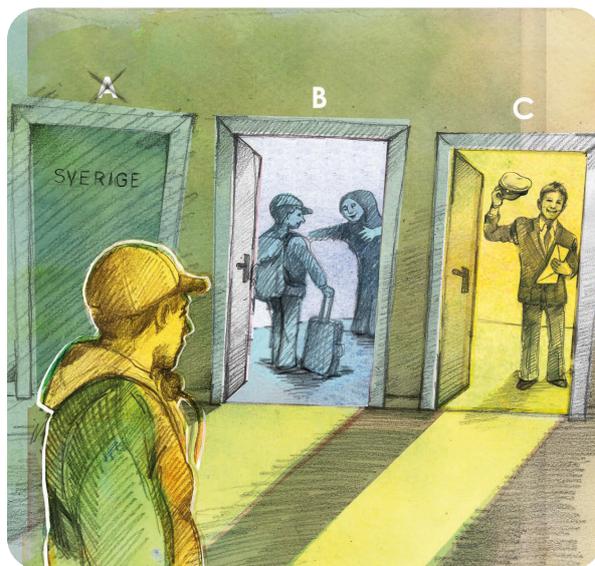


Illustration by Catrina Norman Tengroth

*The Child's Best Interest during the Return Process* Project has this been impacted by many, fairly unpredictable, factors. However we believe that, regardless of new opportunities for asylum or residence permits that apply, or may apply in the future according to legislation, the actors around the child, some with more designated responsibilities than others, need to help with the necessary preparations for a child's return. Not least, all the actors around the child need to prepare the child at an early stage for how the regulations and processes work out for someone who, according to legislation, is an adult. For returnees to many countries, there are opportunities for various forms of support, which in some cases can be individually tailored. It is important to receive information about these forms of assistance before actual return and to have the opportunity to understand and prepare based on what they entail.

15 *De som inte får stanna - Att implementera återvändandepolitik* [Those who are not allowed to stay - implementing return] Delegation for Migration Studies Report 2020:1

## How have we worked?

### The Project's three cornerstones - information, discussion and collaboration

The Jämtland County Administrative Board has been responsible for the dissemination and collaboration structures at regional level, also for municipalities that have not been pilot municipalities. As a forum, the Jämtland County Administrative Board uses the national EKB group. In addition to Jämtland who represent the Northern Region, there are representatives of the East - Stockholm Region, the West - Värmland, the South - Skåne and the Swedish Migration Agency. The EKB Group is linked to the Collaboration Delegation which is tasked to report on strategic planning and to develop collaboration and information regarding the reception of unaccompanied children.

The Project has carried out targeted work in a total of 17 municipalities. Initially, a selection process was carried out concerning the municipalities that could participate in the project as a selection representing different preconditions for reception was required, e.g. large-smaller reception, rural-urban, close-far from Swedish Migration Agency units, owned-procured housing. The concept was to identify support and methods that work regardless of the preconditions in municipalities. As a result of Strömsund Municipality's previous return project, many actors heard about the project early on and wanted to be part of it.

County administrative boards maintain a continuous dialogue with their municipalities and, based on the criteria for selection, they came to play an important role in the dialogue with the Swedish Migration Agency regarding the matching of suitable municipalities. Project focus and operations have successfully complemented the county administrative board government assignment which involved work with initiatives for unaccompanied children who disappear.<sup>16</sup> In that assignment, the development of preventive initiatives was very important, which can be directly linked to our project purpose and goals.

<sup>16</sup> På flykt och försvunnen, [Fleeing and disappeared] County Administrative Board of Stockholm County, Report 2016:25



#### **Municipalities and organisations who have participated in the project:**

Berg, Bräcke, Hudiksvall, Härjedalen, Jönköping, Karlstad, Linköping, Norrköping, Skövde, Storuman, Umeå, Östersund and Västerås

Due to changes in preconditions for reception and thus organisational changes, a number of municipalities and organisations decided to terminate their participation in the project prematurely.

#### **Municipalities that interrupted their participation before the project ended:**

Båstad, Hjo, Tibro and Tidaholm

#### **Organisations:**

Vårlyjus (Stockholm Municipality Children and Youth Activities) and Gothenburg Region Municipal Association

One of the first inputs in the project was to examine the different criteria for the selection of municipalities and then to match them with interested municipalities. This was carried out together with the actors who had already registered an interest, but also included others who could become interesting based on achieving as representative a selection as possible.

A project coordinator was appointed in each participating pilot municipality. Their role was to coordinate all the municipality's actors in project activities, and to strive to implement the project materials and working methods in municipality-specific activities.

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*“The more competence the municipalities possess, the better it will be for the children”*

Head of Unit, Swedish Migration Agency

The coordinators also had the opportunity to study and utilise the necessary competence development areas in their own municipality. The project has also tried to meet these needs both through its own training efforts and by employing external lecturers and educators. Here, project staff from the Swedish Migration Agency have also played a crucial role, as many of the desired competence development initiatives have focused on Agency working methods, issues concerning asylum legislation, return support and opportunities to collaborate with the Agency.

In addition to the new materials produced by the project, massive training efforts have also been conducted under the auspices of the project and external actors in order to be able to meet the skills development needs that are not only expressed in the functions of the participating pilot municipalities but also by NGOs, authorities and other external actors.

The project's three focus areas discussion, information and collaboration are at least as important to practitioners as to the target group. The majority of the pilot municipalities have had three, and many

four, training days or opportunities during the project period. In these, the project's three focus areas have been covered based on the municipality and participating actor needs for competence development.

Discussion leader training, tangible collaboration forums and the question of how to handle and ensure that correct information is conveyed to the child, have been included in these competence development inputs, as well as how to work in a process-oriented fashion in order to reach a consensus on the inputs that are necessary in different situations. Everything is focused on the aim that the child's best interest and the child's needs are to be at the central point of the task.

It is difficult to state that certain inputs were particularly valuable to participants or pilot municipalities, as they have generally expressed themselves to be very satisfied with the project and its work as a whole.

***95% of respondents in project educational input evaluations have experienced the courses as good or very good.***

What has become clear to us is that a professional approach, as well as values, roles and working with yourself as a tool in meeting other people, has a short shelf-life and consequently needs to be included in development work for all operations. In order to be able to perform a good job in the best interests of the child, we need to work with ourselves and also with collaboration and creating consensus on the relevant issues.

The project has organised and participated in external conferences, both physical and digital. The Human Rights Days in 2018 and 2019 are one example.

One success factor has been to combine Strömsund Municipality's competencies and experience of working with children in migration from a municipal perspective, with the Swedish Migration Agency's expert functions in the area of children in the asylum

and return process. The project has thus been living proof of collaboration in the best interests of the child. Our evidence-based work has also made a difference and left its mark on Swedish Migration Agency quality development work.

The issue of unaccompanied children whose applications have been refused and are facing return has gained further ground at the national level thanks to the project's ability to raise the issue in current forums. This is despite the fact that many did not prioritise return work at that time as reception of this group had decreased.

To ensure sustainability after project end, the support office in Strömsund will remain in place under the Resource Centre Integration unit. Project material is available for download and may also be ordered via the [www.begripligt.nu](http://www.begripligt.nu) website. One of the project goals has also been to develop a digital training input for the target group. This has been achieved through the project via the Swedish Migration Agency, which has further developed its children's app Stories to meet the needs of unaccompanied children.

Municipalities are still responsible for the reception of asylum-seeking children and young people without guardians. The need has decreased from a national perspective - but not as far as the individual child is concerned. The need for knowledge and coordination remains and municipal preparedness is essential. The unaccompanied minors who arrive today need

the same support as those who came in 2015 and the years after that. Here again, we need to remind ourselves that every single child counts, every single child's process is important, in order to ensure quality. Every single child has the right to be met by good-quality work by all the actors in the individual child's network. This is the project approach and target image.

### **New or updated material developed during the project period:**

- *Att söka asyl* och karta över asylprocessen (Applying for asylum and a map of the asylum process)
- *Att samtala om asyl och återvändande* (Talking about asylum and returning) - material and methodological support plus discussion leader training
- *Samverka för barnets bästa* (Collaboration in the best interest of the child) - process-oriented tool for mapping and development of collaboration
- *Samverkanstrappan* (Collaboration ladder) - basic material for meetings and discussions aimed at clarifying the needs and expectations of the various participating actors

Method and material are permeated by the basic principles of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, as well as joint ethical matters and positions. Everything is aimed at preparing, strengthening and equipping the child for different possible future scenarios by helping them to build up different alternative goals.<sup>17</sup>

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17 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child

*'Att söka asyl' [Applying for asylum] and 'Att samtala om asyl och återvändande' [Talking about Asylum and Return] are our proposals on how to structure work with the target group.*

*'Samverkan för barnets bästa' [Collaboration in the Best Interest of the Child] is a process-oriented approach to mapping and improving collaboration during the asylum and return process. It aims to support, develop and evaluate collaboration from a child's perspective. Along with this methodological support there are templates for the user to be able to document, develop and follow the work/process in an easy-to-understand manner.*

*At the centre of each element is, of course, the individual child's needs and preconditions. Nevertheless, a general structure such as the collaboration model, can contribute to more systematic work in which the child's needs become easier to identify and meet. The model is generally held to be applicable in different municipalities and for different activities.*

*The material is currently only available in Swedish.*

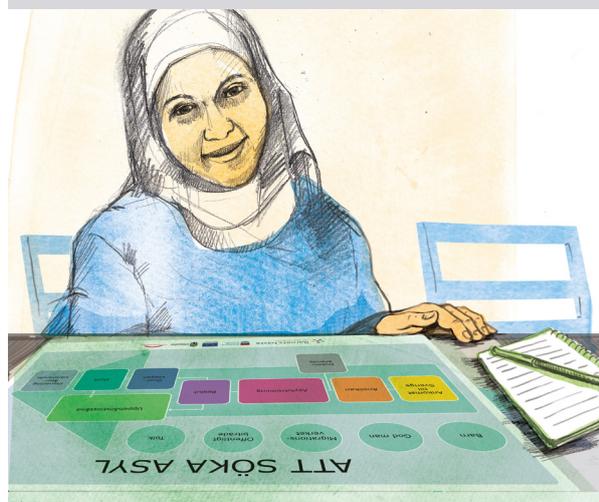
## Samverkan för barnets bästa

*Ett processinriktat arbetssätt för att kartlägga och förbättra samverkan för barnets bästa under asyl- och återvändandeprocess*



## Att söka asyl

*Handledning för interaktiv karta över asylprocessen för ensamkommande barn och ungdomar*



## Att samtala om asyl och återvändande

*Ett stödmaterial för dig som möter ensamkommande barn under asyl- och återvändandeprocess*



# Information

## Applying for asylum - an interactive map of the asylum process

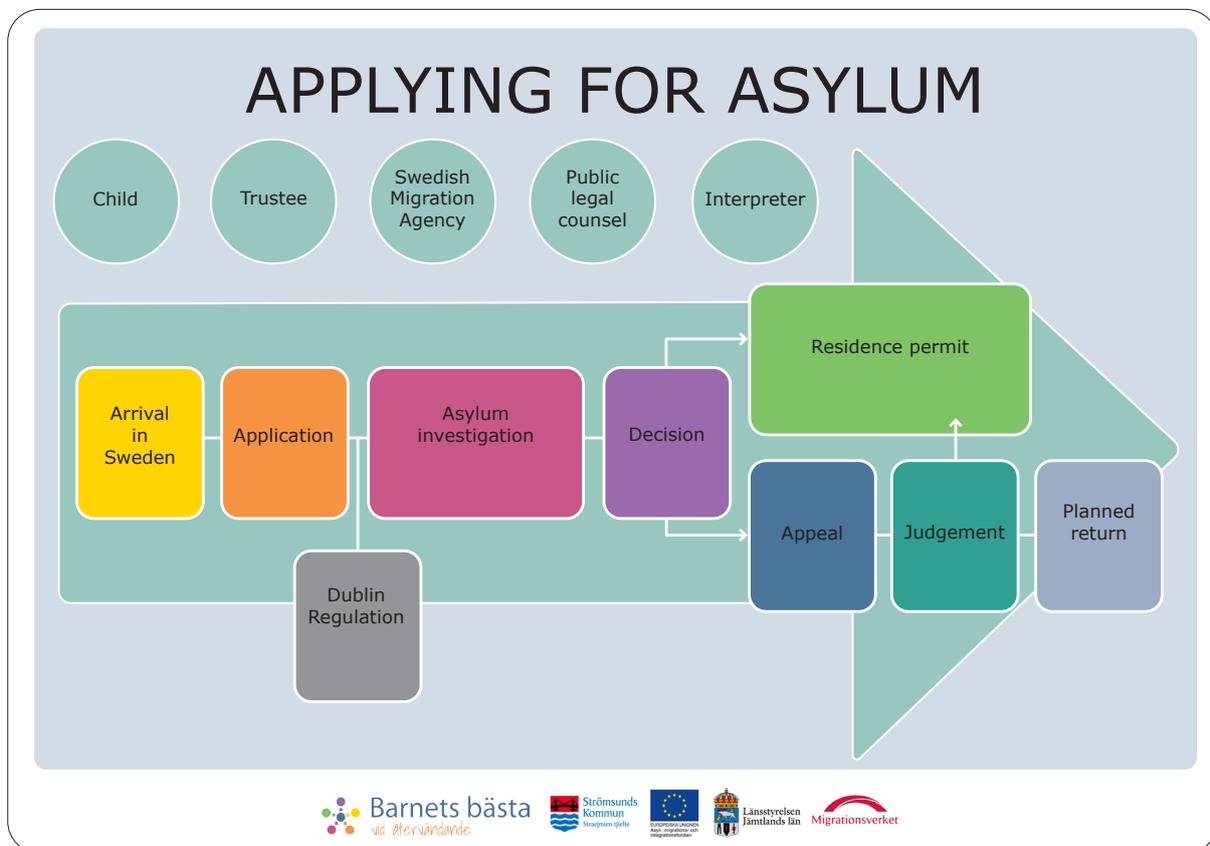
Several of the children interviewed during the pre-study stated that they did not understand the different stages of the asylum process, despite the fact that the Swedish Migration Agency always gives them this information when they first meet. The children are probably not always receptive to this information when they are in an investigation or service of documents situation at the Swedish Migration Agency.

During the first period, there is also a lot of other information that the child must process. Consequently, we believe that unaccompanied children need to receive information about the asylum process on a number of occasions, preferably in an environment that is more familiar and relaxed than a Swedish Migration Agency meeting room. Language may also form a barrier.

Children have the right to accurate information about their own process. We have therefore constructed material about the asylum process that the actors around the child can use to make the process more understandable to the child. This material provides a refined description of the asylum process itself in order for the information to be as easily accessible as possible and to minimise the risk of the child confusing the roles of different actors.

The best person/role to manage the transfer of general information may vary from municipality to municipality - the main thing is that it becomes routine in the work with these children. However, we believe that it is important that a trustee is present at information sessions, as this person possesses information about the individual child's situation.

The information material is designed as an interactive map of the various steps in the asylum process. Each step includes a number of dialogue cards. The cards contain a number of questions to the adult who provides the information, as well as a number of questions to the child. The adult must therefore be well



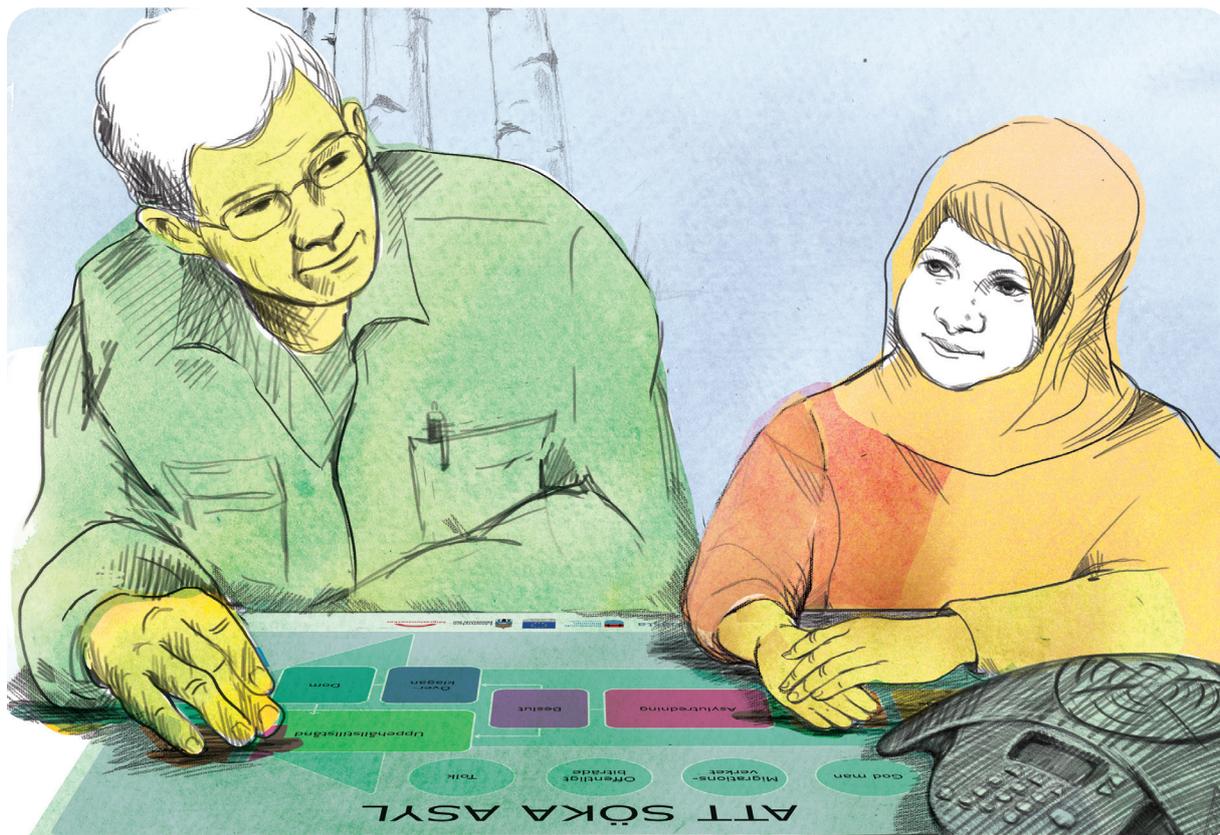


Illustration by Catrina Norman Tengroth

acquainted with the asylum process. There is the accompanying manual as support in answering the child's questions. The questions that are addressed to the child aim to link the information to what the children have already experienced. Most children remember for example, that they had their fingerprints taken but far from all of them know why.

The interactive map of the asylum process is based on the child being involved and being allowed to express his or her own experiences and issues.

The project's work has led to all unaccompanied children who have come to Strömsund municipality since 2015 being offered discussions and information about the asylum and return process. One outcome of this has been that the children's mood has actually lightened in that school attendance has improved and that staff have experienced greater harmony in their residential housing. Fewer children have also disappeared in connection with an asylum study or in the event of a refusal.

When asked how the children themselves have perceived these discussions and the possibility of information about the asylum and return process, answers have generally been positive. Children are looking for safe adults who can provide correct information without themselves being drawn into the children's possible difficulty in, for example, accepting or understanding the refusal of a residence permit.

## Discussions

Refusal decisions arouse very strong feelings, not only in the children themselves but also in the adults around them. Since it is the child's image of the future, perhaps marked by both disappointment and fear, that the adults tap into, it is easy to be gripped by the same feeling of hopelessness that the children themselves feel. When we do not feel that we can say something that makes things better, it is easy for us to remain silent and for the children to be left alone with their thoughts. The part of the model that deals with conversation and dialogue aims to give the adults around the children incentives and tools to dare to

talk to them. The children need to be given the opportunity to ventilate sadness, anxiety or disappointment, but also in the long run to gain perspective on what a return may mean. They may need help to relieve guilt and shame and to talk about what important people there are to turn to here and in their home country. They may also need to talk about what disappearing from the system could mean in the short and long term and gain help to find joy in life, even though it may feel like their whole lives have been shattered.

In these discussions, the children need to be met by empathetic adults who can provide clear, correct information when necessary and also act as a sounding board, who listen actively and help to broaden reasoning and advance thinking. The focus is on discussions with children in the return process after a final refusal, but if these are to be of any quality, good relationships must be built up at a previous stage.

In the structure of the discussions, we emphasise that all adults are important to the child, but that there are actors who bear increased responsibility for meeting their needs. We also show why good dialogue between adults is essential. Discussions with the child need to take place in different ways based on subject, purpose and the child's needs. The model describes how every-day, spontaneous and natural conversations need to be supplemented by more structured reconciliation discussions where the children get their own time and a clear agenda. For some children, more therapeutic conversations may also be needed. This model encourages creativity in the work with each individual child, identifying both the form of discussion and the form of interaction that suits them best. At the same time, we provide more practical checklists of what should be remembered in these discussions during the various steps of the asylum process.

In *Talking about asylum and return*, there are parts that can be used by everyone who meets unaccompanied children, regardless of whether they work at a residential housing or at school, are a trustee, work in the social services or in an NGO. Use the material in *Applying for asylum* in a parallel manner in order to add factual knowledge about how the asylum process works.

Read about what can be good to remember in discussions during the various steps of the asylum process. Theory is mixed with examples from reality in which discussion leaders share their reflections. There are also related questions to work on, by yourself or with colleagues.

If you wish to develop your relationship skills even more, there is also a self-evaluation to use after discussions on the asylum and return process. Discussions with the child need to take place in different ways based on subject, purpose and the child's needs. Every-day, spontaneous and natural conversations need to be supplemented by more structured reconciliation discussions where the children get their own time and a clear agenda. For some children, more therapeutic conversations may also be necessary. We encourage creativity in the work with each individual child, identifying both the form of discussion and the form of interaction that suits them best.

Every child who has experienced something difficult needs to tell someone about it. Sometimes there may be a need for a therapeutic contact, but above all children need access to conversations with their immediate surroundings, where they can share thoughts and feelings in a safe environment. The fact that children feel that they have an adult who is available to see and listen to them is a strong compensatory protective factor. This is accepted knowledge. Many of the children in the report *Between Refusal and Expulsion* described that they did not feel listened to. During the period after refusal, several children described situations where social workers, residential staff or trustees had not indicated that their feelings had been seen or cared about.

Several children described the feeling that all the adults around them only did what was required because they were paid to do it. The staff said they did not usually talk about such things. There was no one to talk to about this.

*"(...) They did nothing special, just their routines (...) It was just us guys sitting and talking. The staff did not care."*  
(Child 4, Between Refusal and Expulsion.)

On the contrary, the interviews with the adult actors showed a great deal of commitment, but that at the same time there was insecurity in the discussion and that it was easy to experience powerlessness in that there was nothing they could say that could alleviate or resolve the child's situation. Many also described an uncertainty about the boundary between support and treatment. There was an ignorance about concrete topics such as crisis reactions, confidentiality issues and Swedish Migration Agency operations, and many found the refusal difficult to relate to.

*"Sometimes you can think the world is unfair. But they have to make a decision, that's just how it is. They might know facts about a case that we do not know. But sometimes you think that some decisions are just crazy."*

(Counsellor 3, Between Refusal and Expulsion)

We assume that the children's and the adults' images are connected: the actors' insecurity and unfamiliarity with dealing with the refusal issue is reflected in how the children experience their surroundings. The guide *Discussing asylum and return* should be regarded as support in meeting children in the asylum and return process so that the surroundings can help them in the actual situation they are in. The children's experiences alone form sufficient reason to want to improve adult actors' accessibility and listening ability.

The lack of initiative for discussions about what is difficult is often not related to a lack of commitment. On the contrary, there is considerable concern for the children in most people who have chosen to meet them in professional contexts. What then is it that means that children in the return process are treated like the elephant in the room? One reason is uncertainty about how to approach the child around the issues. "I don't have answers to all the questions that may come up. What kind of discussion partner am I then?"

*The Child's Best Interest during the Return Process* Project states that this is a fear you must be prepared to face regardless of the difficult subject in question. We are faced with the challenge of not having ready-made solutions. However, your presence and the discussion

itself holds the greatest significance. Another part is your professional role. Where do you draw the line between compassionate discussions with a mentor or trustee and therapeutic treatment? What is my task and what should someone else take up with the child? Therapy should, of course, be carried out by those who have proper training. At the same time, we must not forget that discussions are a natural part of all social interaction and not a science that should be left to experts. A simple conversation may exert a therapeutic effect without being part of therapy.

Good, trusting relationships in our immediate environment exert a healing function in themselves. Meaningful conversations in everyday life may mean that professional counselling may never become necessary. People, and perhaps especially children, possess amazing resilience. Children who are living with asylum refusal must also be able to feel well! When the crisis phase after a refusal message has subsided and the child begins to find a new structure in life, this is a healthy sign to encourage and support. Play, activities and friends that fill up a lot of time are vital. At the same time, there may still be reason to help the child prepare for an uncertain future and see different possible options for when it is time to return. Many children like to protect their surroundings from their own pain and say that everything is fine. Many do not want to experience their own feelings by touching on the subject. The adults' responsibility is to look at the child's entire way of being, meet any needs that may arise and ensure that the child has access to both play and serious moments. You may not be the person the child chooses to confide in. The child has the right to choose to discuss or to abstain, but in order to be able to choose, an offer must be made and that offer may need to be made many times and in different ways for the child to find it possible to make the decision.

We believe that it is important that the actors around each child take joint responsibility for seeing the child and inviting them into empathic discussions and relationships. Discussions contribute to creating order and structure in life and the opportunity to move forward in an individual's reasoning. When adults show that they dare to bring up topics for discussion, the concept that is to be conveyed is that nothing is so difficult that it is not possible to share with others.



*Illustration by Catrina Norman Tengroth*

The concept of discussion leaders can very easily lead to performance anxiety. Being there with the child is the basic thing to do and this is what creates space for in-depth discussion.

The goal is just being together and conversations become part of that content. Discussions and communication with a child may take place in many different ways. We need to meet each child based on their individual needs. Discussion is not always the easiest tool when working with people who are just learning the language in a new country. Music, image, drama, body language or alternative ways of expression form a good complement. Here, however, we focus on structure and practical tips for the discussion part of communication.

We also highlight ethics and a professional approach and what this means to us actors and to the children we meet. This is also about providing accurate information. There is more about how we think concerning discussions based on the role you have in the child's network, and how all the different actors can alternate and interact in the process of discussing asylum and return with the child. We have tried to

clarify/exemplify each actor's area of responsibility when it comes to discussions, and also in the debate about important adults and key individuals.

In order to further facilitate, there are examples of discussion situations we ourselves have been in together with children and young people during these processes. These are followed by discussion questions where you can reflect on what you yourself would have done or wanted to do in a similar situation. We also know that many people find it difficult to respond to and deal with different emotions so we have devoted a section to this. All emotions the child carries and chooses to express must be allowed to be present, be received and, of course, taken seriously.

Last but not least, we must remember that unaccompanied children always come from a context, a family. Regardless of what happened on the trip and whether they have contact or not, many children have one or some family members left in their home country or in another country. Even the children who lost their family in war or during their trip to Sweden have an origin to relate to. Very few children manage to move half way across the world on their own without adults

backing them up, practically and financially. The children who do not have contact with their families still have their thoughts and feelings about their origins.

In order to be able to work with a truly empathetic attitude and to be able to accommodate the child's feelings, your mutual relationship is fundamental. This relationship can only develop if there is security and trust in both directions. Here it is the adult who must take the first step.

Adults gain a higher level of credibility and become important on a completely different level when they are who they say they are. The majority of children have also expressed that they want us to act on the basis of the role we have; social workers must be and act as social workers. Teachers must be teachers and stand for the democratic society they teach about.

Our conclusion is simple; for all of us humans to feel safe and able to develop, we need to be surrounded by understandable and manageable everyday life. A life in which most things are predictable. However, we are able to handle far more complex and unpredictable situations, without stalling our development or developing ill health of any kind. One wellbeing factor in such situations is to be surrounded by people who are predictable in their roles. This becomes extra important when we are exposed to some form of external stress or a scenario with an unpredictable outcome.

## Collaboration

*Collaboration refers to the dialogue and cooperation that takes place between independent and parallel social actors in order to coordinate the achievement of common goals.*<sup>18</sup>

In *Collaboration in the best interests of the child*, we present a process-oriented approach that aims to support, develop and evaluate collaboration from a child's perspective. It is based partly on experience from Strömsund Municipality activities concerning collaboration around unaccompanied asylum-se-

eking children, and partly on experiences from participating municipalities. We have also been influenced by studies on driving forces and motivation, preconditions for, and forms of, collaboration as well as the various tools and methods of quality assurance techniques.

At the beginning of the project period, it became clear that participating municipalities were experiencing similar difficulties and expressing similar wishes regarding collaboration. Together, we identified the difficulties that constituted primary obstacles to functioning collaboration at municipal as well as at regional level. One important piece of the puzzle in a well-functioning collaboration model is that we need to work in a more structured manner and focus on what the different functions should undertake in order that processing information, knowledge, skills and routines are not dependent on individuals and, in a worst-case scenario, disappear when a person leaves or changes position.

Our guide for collaboration is therefore partly based on experience from Strömsund Municipality activities with inter-municipal collaboration around unaccompanied minors, and partly on the influence of research on driving forces and motivation, preconditions for, and forms of, collaboration. Based on our local work, we have also drawn general conclusions that we believe other municipalities can use.

According to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the best interests of the child must be the primary consideration in all actions concerning children, whether taken by public or private social welfare institutions, courts, administrative authorities or legislative bodies. All the country's municipalities have a statutory responsibility for unaccompanied children. In order to be able to live up to this responsibility, collaboration between the actors involved in the child's surroundings is essential.

Collaboration becomes a prerequisite for safeguarding these children's rights and opportunities in accordance with the UN Convention.

18 Ministry of Justice *Samhällets krisberedskap — stärkt samverkan för ökad säkerhet* [Social crisis preparedness - strengthened collaboration for increase security] 2009/10:124

There must be good preconditions in place if collaboration is to work. Collaboration must permeate all levels of the activities involved. This means that managers and employees must be involved and everyone must take their own responsibility for making collaboration work. It is important that someone initiates the process. Who this individual is may be different from municipality to municipality. The real collaboration takes place at individual level, but for it to function properly, additional forums are required, otherwise the work around the individual child risks problems due to organisational differences and other types of obstacles.

The project has chosen to structure collaboration work on the basis of three levels: the overall, operational and individual levels. A great deal of focus has also been placed on creating good preconditions for collaboration, not least in terms of creating a common knowledge platform for all the actors involved. Basic preconditions include offering further training in current confidentiality legislation, working actively

with fundamental values and organisational cultures and ensuring that there is openness and understanding that different activities work in different ways and must continue to do so. The differences themselves do not have to be an obstacle to collaboration, but it is everyone's responsibility to find ways around the differences so that it is still possible to work towards common goals.

For the municipalities that want to improve collaboration around unaccompanied children, all the relevant actors must use common working methods. It may be difficult for individual, committed employees to change existing structures. Sufficient time and resources are also necessary to define the local conditions that collaboration work has to relate to.

### Who can use this approach?

The process-oriented approach that the project has developed can be used by municipalities who want to improve collaboration around unaccompanied



Illustration by Catrina Norman Tengroth

asylum-seeking children, and at the same time do so with the children in focus.

It can be used to plan and evaluate existing collaboration at different levels and for different degrees of preparedness. This means that all municipalities can use this material in their planning work, regardless of the scope of unaccompanied minor reception today or in the future. The municipal actors who meet or work with unaccompanied children include trustees, residential housing or foster homes, schools and social services. Other important actors are the Swedish Migration Agency and health and medical care. In other respects, actors from civil society may also play an important role for the child, which is why their participation in collaboration must not be forgotten.

The project therefore focuses on providing a structure proposal that can be used in work with all unaccompanied minors, regardless of what special needs the child may have and irrespective of how municipal activities around them are designed. Most descrip-

tions of what the rules of procedure should look like for unaccompanied children follow a line from the time the child arrives, via a decision on residence permit up to the child's 18th birthday.

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*“I want the best for these children and young people. Us adults must be there for them.”*

Ulla Landenmark, Project Coordinator,  
Östersund Municipality

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*“Added value takes the form of ripples across the water. These training opportunities have opened the eyes of participants. This approach has provided an understanding and initiated interest in the issue. Cooperating partners have opened new forums, such as the Church of Sweden who has created new ways to help people. The Church has expanded its events to include homework help sessions for those with study residence permits and also other committed private individuals. They have advertised their activities more widely; they are more visible and they involve both young people and already established Swedes. The school has also started courses based on those who have been granted a study permit, as well as other people who have been able to take part. They have moved on from Why to How - how do we help? Which in turn has become a driving force in providing support in various ways.”*

Interview with Project Coordinator Anna Westerling, Härjedalen Municipality

### **Collaboration at an overall level**

This is essential if the needs of individual children are to be placed in a larger context. Overall collaboration also legitimises work at other levels. Improving collaboration at this level is a strategically-important issue so that activities with individual children may develop. Identifying forms for well-functioning collaboration that include all the children and young people and that ensure that they are not tossed around between different authorities is a serious challenge.

The purpose of collaboration at the overall level is to establish clearly-stated governing documents and agreements that stipulate how collaboration is to be carried out. The overall level lays the foundation for consistent, functional collaboration. Clarity of task and an understanding of each other's assignments improve the preconditions for individuals and for officials to participate in well-functioning collaboration, which ultimately benefits the individual child.

### **Collaboration at operational level**

The overall level lays the foundation for consistent, functional collaboration. In the next step, managers of operations within the social services, residential housing, schools, guardianship services and other relevant operations must, together, come to a conclusion on how collaboration is to be conducted in practice. In operations, agreements and arrangements determined at an overall level can be translated into more tangible routines and guidelines. In addition, this provides a common forum where representatives from different activities have the opportunity to raise issues, point out difficulties and identify solutions. Through discussion and exchange of experience, collaboration at operational level can lead to better and more cohesive work with unaccompanied children. The operational level also functions as a link between the overall and the indi-

vidual levels, through which information and issues can be conveyed. If operational level collaboration is to work, regular meetings are essential. By taking up information from their own operations in a common forum, each activity can identify strategies to meet challenges they experience when working with the children. Another goal is to create consensus on how specific issues should be managed and agree that joint action is required. Chances of success are greater when operations help each other.

### **Collaboration at individual level - creating a hub around the child**

We believe that the three main actors in municipal activities around the child - social worker, contact person/foster home and trustee - need to form a coordinated hub around the child. Just as parents talk to each other about approaches on different issues, professional actors need to do the same so the child does not have to take responsibility for puzzling together all the different messages and opinions. In practical everyday life, good collaboration between the trustee and the foster parent or contact person at the residential housing is decisive for whether the child will experience a safe and predictable life. Central actors in all municipalities are the social worker, trustee, contact person at residential housing or foster home and key person from school in the form of a mentor or similar. Examples of other important actors may include the child's discussion support from Child Psychiatry (BUP) or student health.

Depending on the child's age and maturity, discussions should be held with the child about who should attend. Collaboration at the individual level aims to ensure that the child's needs are taken into account and that there is a plan and a clear structure for follow-up so that the child can receive all the necessary support and help.

## The municipalities' role in collaboration

Karlstad was one of the pilot municipalities in the project. Karlstad Municipality has received unaccompanied children for many years and has been working to clarify and create predictability around the asylum process. They chose to join the project because they felt the need to find simple, educational material aimed directly at children within the asylum and return process and to develop collaboration around the child. Like the other participating municipalities, Karlstad has periodically functioned as a working group studying how the process-oriented approach to collaboration should be designed. The pilot municipalities have been involved and have exerted influence by, for example, testing the tools in their municipality and at the same time feeding back needs and providing suggestions for the work going forward.

The project coordinators in Karlstad Municipality started up their own local collaboration group consisting of key individuals from schools, student health, residential housing, guardianship services and civil society. Common to all actors was the need to make it easier for the children and to become aware of each other's roles. The collaboration ladder is an important tool that formed the basis for creating consensus and a common approach to what needed to be done and when. The project coordinators describe the collaboration model itself as a picture frame. The painting has been created by the group together and is regarded as an ongoing project while the framework stands for direction and forward movement. Their Collaboration Group meets twice a year, its purpose being to spread knowledge and approaches, gather needs and identify challenges. Success factors for the Collaboration Group? Their work is not personal, everyone feels equal in the group and has adopted an open-minded approach. Also, all the participants clearly understand why the group exists and what is expected of each actor.

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*“We were informed about the Strömsund Model as an example of a successful case where something innovative had been done at municipal level. This contrasted with several statements from various participants in the survey who considered that there were major problems in the collaboration between different actors and great difficulties in involving municipal agencies in return work.”*

From Strömsund Municipality interview with Henrich Malm Lindberg in connection with the release of the Delmi Report 2020:1 in February.

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*“Knowledge is among the most important aspects of this issue. Both for us who work in the field and also to ensure that knowledge is passed on to the children and their families. If you are in possession of the correct information you can also do the right thing. No one person's role is more important than another's.”*

Ingrid Kåwe, Church of Sweden in Karlstad.

## Collaboration Strömsund Municipality

In Strömsund Municipality, we have actively worked with migration and integration issues over a long period of time, and since 2010 have undertaken the reception of children without guardians.

The municipality's activities have reached a consensus on the importance of preparedness, even though the reception of children without guardians has now decreased.

It is not primarily about *how many* children come, the focus is on *each individual child being included and equally important*. Every single child who arrives will be entitled to be met by the same qualitative development work in 2020 as the children who arrived in 2015. This mindset also clarifies the need for a collaboration model per se, and has resulted in our existing collaboration model being transformed into *a contingency plan for the reception of children without guardians*.

In Strömsund, we have also chosen to make an addition to the local agreement on the reception of newly-arrived children and young people in the form of this contingency plan. We know that the municipality, as well as individual actors within operations, need to understand that they share responsibility for these children with the Swedish Migration Agency. This means that the other actors must place emphasis on good collaboration with the Swedish Migration Agency and ensure that it is possible to both establish and re-establish new contacts with the Agency if necessary.

We firmly believe that some of our success factors, when it comes to collaboration and preparedness, include our organisational design, active management and politicians who prioritise this issue.

Our department, Resource Centre for Integration, reports to the Future and Development Committee. Refugee reception, community orientation, supported housing, ANDTS coordination, coordination of activities against radicalisation and violent extremism are all here, as well as migration and integration-related projects such as *The Child's Best Interest during the Return Process* Project. A variety of functions and skills such as sociologists, interpreters, language support, educators, nurses, social educators and drama teachers are available here, to name a few of our resources. Together, we also constitute an expert function for advice and support for all other municipal operations.

In Strömsund, we have chosen to recognise and accept the challenges around collaboration, task consensus and quality development, which has also led us forward.

We have worked actively to ensure that all the actors possess an understanding of each other's roles and responsibilities in the individual child's network. This makes it easier for us to be able to maintain factual and reasonable expectations of each other. It also includes an understanding and knowledge of the opportunities and limitations of the different roles or functions, for example due to different levels of confidentiality or terms of reference.

The central inputs in the model that Strömsund Municipality has developed, sometimes called the Strömsund Model, were initially based on the following and have, through *The Child's Best Interest during the Return Process* Project, been further developed through our process-oriented approach:

- Competence development with supervised follow-up for staff and trustees incl. training initiatives in crisis management, PTSD, confidentiality and the asylum process.
- Information to children immediately after arrival in the municipality to give a sense of context, support in thinking about refusal and to find out what to do if there is a refusal and in that case what it may mean.
- Information, discussions and dialogue after refusal, identifying alternative target images, previous catastrophic thinking, other possible outcomes and opportunities to move on.
- Collaboration manual and process manual for those who work around the child.
- The Collaboration ladder - a basis for discussion in order to arrive at common responsibility and action in a simple and practical manner.

Our focus is still on preparing unaccompanied children for a possible return as return, in itself, is a potential outcome of the asylum process. The Model is based on our conviction that inputs are necessary for all asylum-seeking children because all of them must potentially return.

We believe that the best interest of the child has the greatest potential fulfilment when a common thread runs through all the inputs we operate, from the arrival of the child to a possible return. This means that we constantly collaborate with the individual child's best interest in focus.

# Preparedness Plan based on collaboration mapping in Strömsund Municipality (2020)

<b>1. COLLABORATION GROUP</b> Which roles must collaborate?	<b>2. PURPOSE AND HOW COLLABORATION IS TO BE CARRIED OUT</b> What is the aim of the collaboration in this group? How is the collaboration to be implemented?	<b>3. SUCCESS FACTORS WITHIN COLLABORATION</b> What works well?	<b>4. COLLABORATION AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT</b> What must be improved for the collaboration to work as efficiently as possible?
Preparedness Group EKB Roles: RCI EC convenors, RCI coordinates, IFO Manager, Assistant Principal Upper Secondary School, Schools Manager Compulsory School & Guardianship Committee	Strategically future-orientated at the operational and management levels. Share information about the current situation. Meets twice a year, September and March. Fixed agenda. Memoranda are distributed to the relevant heads of administrations.	Consensus on what needs to be done. In the event of the necessity for measures that originate outside ordinary operations, further reporting to the relevant head of administration who is to take these measures.	The convenor is mandated to call the Group together for extra meetings in addition to those scheduled.
	Agenda 1 Situation report and operational report. 2 Situational intelligence. 3 Necessity of measures. 4 Any Other Business? 5 Summary of meeting.		
Trustee (initiates contact) IM Coordinator/Registration Officer - Young people	Information exchange prior to start of studies.	Clarify the preconditions for success in studies for both students and receiving school.	Young people need comprehensive information about the Swedish school system, their opportunities, rights and obligations.
TO BE ACTIVATED WHEN NECESSARY (Preparedness Group (EC RCI)) Caseworker Guardianship Services Residential housing	Situation Report on access to trustees, accommodation places etc.	Joint current situation	That there is continuity in meeting regularity.
TO BE ACTIVATED WHEN NECESSARY Team meetings between residential housing managers and personnel and caseworkers	Very regular follow-up of current placements, once per month	Joint planning of cases	
SIP meetings with caseworker, trustee, child, school, residential housing staff	E.g. meeting when refusal of asylum decision has been received. Caseworker calls the SIP meeting on own or other's initiative	Joint information and planning of cases	
Collaboration - residential housing, EKB, social services (activate team meetings); Coordinator EKB, EC RCI, IFO Manager, Caseworker & Guardianship Services	Check of current placements. Forward planning. Meet once/term	Current overall situation in municipality. Financial situation and prognosis. Clear overview of possible financial benefits/grants including re-application grant.	
Regional collaboration; County Administrative Board convenes RCI coordinators IFO manager meetings regionally.	Twice per term. Current situation report plus prognoses.	County Administrative Board responsible for coordination. Overall current situation report. Exchange of experience and good examples.	

## Annual questionnaires to participating municipalities

improve the situation for unaccompanied children in the asylum and return process.

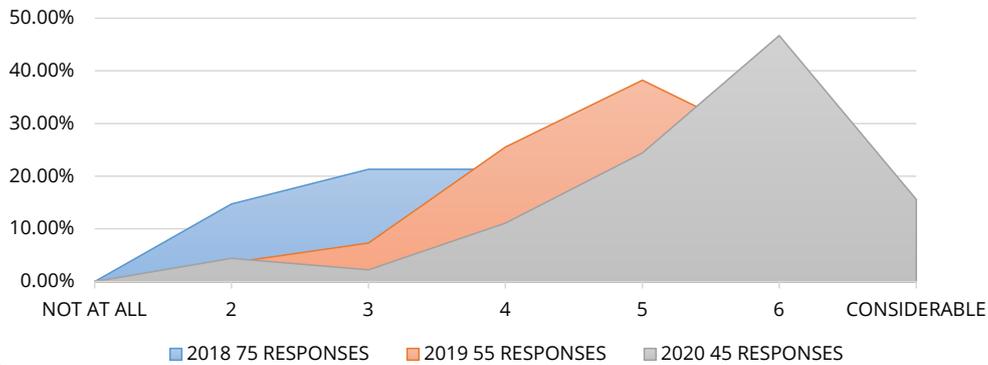
There are clear indications that the project has made a difference to participating municipalities in terms of information, discussions and collaboration to

Participating municipalities have answered an annual questionnaire during the three years the project has been underway. Survey results show a clear positive change, year by year.

**In the 2020 survey, respondents stated, as compared to 2018, that:**

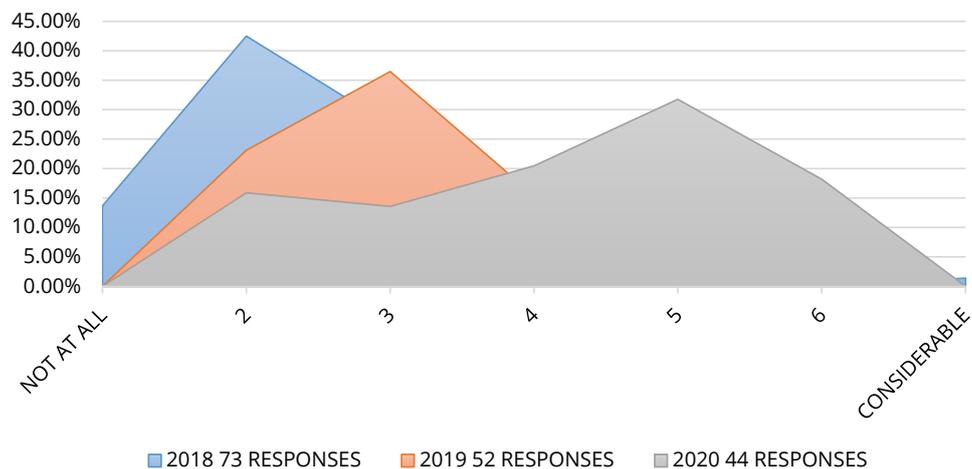
- They have greatly increased their knowledge of the asylum process and work with the return process.

### TO WHICH EXTENT DO YOU POSSESS KNOWLEDGE ON THE ASYLUM AND RETURN PROCESS IN ORDER TO MEET CURRENT NEEDS?

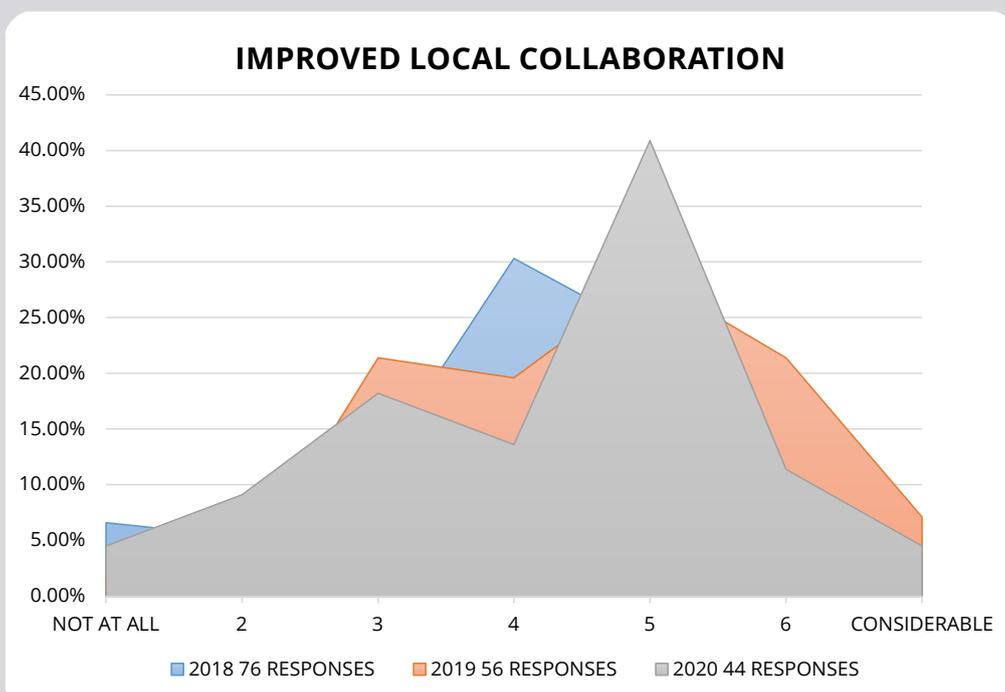


- Unaccompanied children and young people receive information on the return process to a much greater degree.

### TO WHICH EXTENT DO YOU EXPERIENCE THAT UNACCOMPANIED MINORS AND YOUNG PEOPLE RECEIVE INFORMATION ON THE RETURN PROCESS?



- **Adults who meet unaccompanied children and young people possess sufficient knowledge and skills to meet their needs in the asylum and return process.**
- **Those concerned in the municipality possess knowledge of the asylum and return process to a much greater degree.**
- **Improved preconditions are in place for local collaboration between relevant activities in the municipality that affect children without guardians who must return to their home countries.**



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*“Considerable added value has been made possible by exchange of experience, in particular for the coordinators who have received so much more at the coordinator meetings and Project Place. We have also been strengthened in our own thoughts, from the beginning we were very alone in saying that we need to talk about asylum and refusal, but it has been confirmed that we did and thought right. It has taken several years for Karlstad to get here.”*

Interview with Project Coordinator Linda Schutsch, Karlstad Municipality

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*“The incredible commitment that the project group has brought to the table. The desire to reach out with knowledge and create an understanding of why these issues are so important to talk about. The commitment they have maintained despite reduced numbers. I personally think it has been difficult to ”market” something that is no longer in demand or prioritised outside our operations.”*

Interview with Project Coordinator Annica Dyberg, Umeå Municipality.

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*“I notice a big difference in the unit’s work, knowledge has spread among our external actors and the tone of the discussions in the return process is different.”*

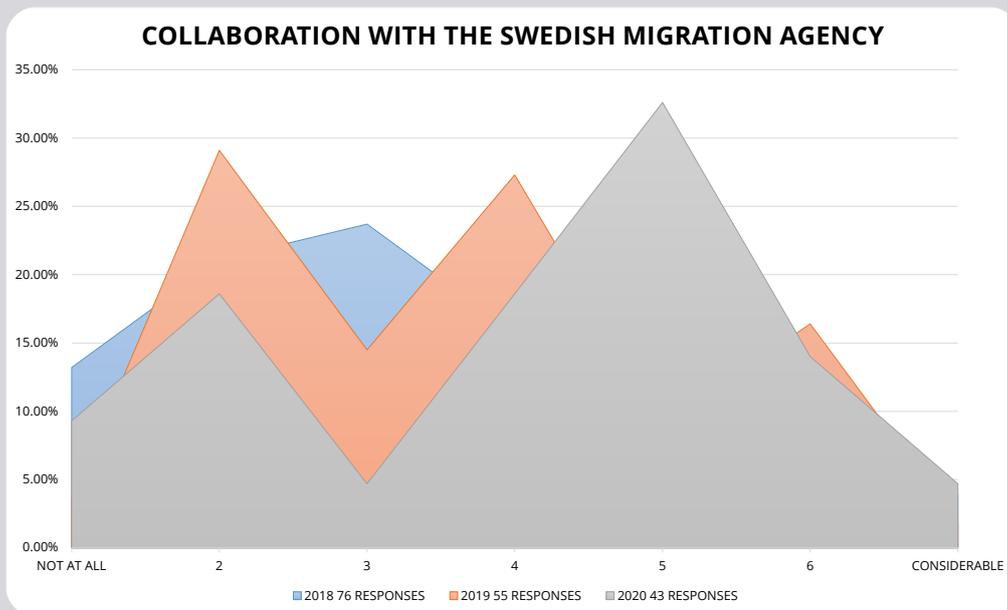
Head of Unit, Swedish Migration Agency

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*“Such a good project that clearly shows the importance of collaboration even after a decision has been made!”*

Head of Unit, Swedish Migration Agency

- **Improved preconditions in place for collaboration with the Swedish Migration Agency on issues that affect children without guardians who must return to their home countries.**



# What is the child's best interest?

In 2015, Sweden was in the process of managing the reception of over 35 000 asylum-seeking children without guardians. Surely, the best interest of the child should be a residence permit in a safe country where it is possible to live and develop according to Western standards?

In Sweden, it is considered best for children to grow up with their biological parents. When it comes to children who, despite this, are considered to be in need of placement other than with their biological family, continuous referrals and cooperation with the biological parents take place as far as possible. Also, we strive to maintain contact between the placed child and the biological parents in order to promote and support their relationship and to enable a possible reunion at a later date. This has not always worked out well, but clinical research still supports the assumption that the individual child feels best about having his or her biological parents available in some manner.

Here, the project has also tried to support the same ideas as concerns asylum-seeking children without guardians. It should be a natural part of the work with the target group to create relationships with the children's parents or relative(s) who remain in the home country at an early stage. Partly to create additional security and relief for the child by ensuring safe, important adults work together and have an understanding of what is in the child's best interests, but also to facilitate and lighten the load of the child and the biological parents or other relatives prior to a possible return. The Save the Children's report titled *Thoughts on Return*<sup>19</sup>, states that the child and the family need to be prepared before departure. Clear information about the process is also essential.

We must respect and understand the fact that both children and important adults need to receive correct information. Knowledge about asylum qualification and how the asylum process works and is assessed in Sweden is also essential. Likewise, family or networks

in the home country need time to digest and process the information about what the child is going through in the country the child is in, and the opportunity to ask questions over time. In this way we can facilitate several scenarios; both for a possible return but also for a possible residence permit of some kind. We also know from experience that granting a residence permit can also throw up a totally different scenario for these children and their families, as everything becomes so definitive.

A children's perspective, as well as a child rights perspective, actually means that the adults around the child must dare to ask questions and take into account what the children themselves want.

Our experience is that the issue is further stigmatised by, for example, media images indicating that return for an unaccompanied child is always and only negative. This attitude may also be assumed to have impacted on many of the actors who encounter unaccompanied children.

If the topic of return and what happens in a return process is too painful for adult actors to discuss with the children, we have also betrayed their right to correct information and safe adults who, in their mission, should act as protective factors for the child within the process.

Adults need to dare to think about and have respect for the fact that the child's own will may be that life would return to the "normal"; to be with their parents or the family that is still there in a home environment, albeit very different from the one we take for granted in Sweden and the West. We need to possess both knowledge and understanding of this, just as we know and understand the children whose desire is to stay in Sweden.

This idea also means that we need to understand that most children may not have chosen their often-dangerous journey here, but have rather carried out what

19 Save the Children Sweden Report *Tänkar om att Återvända: Barn, unga och vuxna om att återvändade till Afghanistan* [Thoughts about return] 2019

the family or relatives wanted and planned for the child, certainly with the greatest goodwill. This means that the children who have a background similar to the above are forced live a life in which lying to adults and peers occurs on a daily basis.

This will be especially important if the child we meet has come to Sweden through the massively-widespread human trafficking industry and its human traffickers from whom they have often received incorrect information and promises about the country they are travelling to. If we understand that false hopes are built up via incorrect or modified information, we can also more easily understand a parent's or relative's frustration that the child, for example, after a certain period of time, has not yet started studying at university level if this was the original plan, or at the child's information about residence permit delay, or perhaps even a refusal of their asylum application.

For the child, this can be very shameful and create even more anxiety than the situation and the uncertainty in the asylum process itself can entail. This further complicates our work.

Adult actors around the child obviously need to assume that the child is telling the truth, but must also dare to ask questions about the child's background, family, relatives and friends at an early stage as the relationship is being established. The aim is to remove the child's burden as much as possible, acting as a safe adult and protection factor as well as helping the child to become involved in his or her own process. The adult world needs to be prepared on the day the child faces a crisis or life-changing event of some kind. Of course, the adult world should also include the child's biological parents or the biological family that remains. This imposes high-level demands on the professionals around the child, but does not really have to be that difficult. As we are working to create relationships, the question of family structure should come up naturally. If we show genuine interest, this also benefits our relationship with the child.

Here, however, opinions may differ; some have pointed out the importance of trusting the child and what the child tells us and not questioning whether there is any family left.

We mean, of course, that we should be extremely careful about the trust that an alliance with the child entails, but we are safe adults and protective factors in the child's life and we also have the task of improving the child's ability to manage and cope with his or her difficult situation within the asylum process. This means that we have an obligation to both familiarise ourselves with, and understand, that each child's starting point and preconditions can be different. Nor can we assume that we surely know what another human being thinks, feels and goes through. We need to include this in our respect for the individual child.



*Illustration by Catrina Norman Tengroth*

### **For whose sake?**

The above question becomes more important to consider when we regard ourselves as a practitioner in a child's network, regardless of whether we act on the basis of a professional role or as a volunteer. We must dare to ask ourselves the question - for whose sake is this effort being made? Hopefully the answer will be from a children's perspective with child rights approach and with the child in focus. Unfortunately, the answer may sometimes also be self-centred.

We know that this happens when we become emotionally involved at a level in which we lose focus on the child's needs and move from our empathic perspective on the issue to sympathy. Here we end up in co-dependence with the child we meet, and then we not only lose our professionalism but also our entire

child's best interest thinking, i.e. placing the child's needs centre stage.<sup>20</sup>

We must understand and respect that the ability to feel with other people represents the deepest compassion. Nor may we assign shame or guilt to this behaviour. On the other hand, we have a responsibility and a strong obligation to work with self-knowledge when we use ourselves as tools in meetings with other people. Otherwise, we will lose direction and client focus. Those who always have to pay the highest price for such a scenario are the children we meet. A meeting with others should be based on and start from empathy and not sympathy, i.e. through empathy to provide tools and strengthen the capabilities of the person we meet. In the long run this leads to autonomy and not to an increased need to be carried as a result of us projecting our own strong emotions.

### How do we take on the task?

When our values clash with the task we are expected to perform, this can become painful. In these situations, we need to put extra effort into going back to putting the child's needs in focus, and not our own. We also need to remember that the relationship with the children we meet is never, and can never be, equal. If their need for help and support had not existed, we probably would never had met.

The children we meet are dependent on us as practitioners, and this is a perspective we must consider and respect, and thus also nurture the trust and confidence that children place in us.

”

*“Important work, I would like to see more of this. The understanding of return has really increased, the tone is different. Now different actors complement each other with the child in focus, instead of being centred on the individual's own commitment to the children. However, we still have more to learn when it comes to working and discussion methods, not only in matters that concern children. More of this.”*

Head of Unit, Swedish Migration Agency

### What is a professional approach?

We need to be aware of, and take responsibility for, maintaining our professional approach, primarily in the best interests of the child, but also for our own well-being. Thus, we need to take human factors into account at both client and practitioner level.

Providing correct information and offering the children we meet discussions and support to reach an understanding of how the asylum process works in Sweden is easy to link to the Convention on the Rights of the Child as legislation. Children have the right to information and need safe adults.

Adults who are clearly-defined in their role towards the child and thus are who they pretend to be, also become definite protective factors. When safe adults have agreed or reached consensus on the child's needs and best interests, the task becomes clearer for us as practitioners. Then the child will also feel more secure. Furthermore, professionals are governed by both professional ethics and professional morality. These further reinforce the importance of each adult's personal responsibility and of a professional approach.



Illustration by Catrina Norman Tengroth

# Our accumulated experience in the best interest of the child

We believe that the BBIC method is a good starting point for work with children in the asylum and return process. BBIC consists of nine basic principles that form the foundation of the social services' work with children and young people. These are, in turn, based on a set of values, theory and methodological approaches stemming from current research, legislation and practice.

Consequently, we have used the BBIC structure to further develop important issues relevant to reaching a deeper understanding of what the child's best interests are and what we then need to take into account.

BBIC work will:

- begin from the child's rights
- let the best interests of the child be decisive
- strive for equal opportunities for each child
- apply a holistic perspective to the child and his/her situation
- involve the child, the family and the network
- take place in collaboration with other professions and operations
- be based on evidence-based practice
- counter difficulties and strengthen resources
- systematically follow the child and the inputs that concern him/her.

We have chosen to examine at these nine points from the project's perspective in terms of approaches and efforts to improve the situation for unaccompanied children in the asylum and return processes.

## How can we begin from the child's rights?

Children need to be involved, express their opinions and share information. We need to ensure that staff and others around the child possess knowledge of what child rights mean. This applies to knowledge of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child in general and also knowledge of the actual consequences this entails for various activities and how it affects

other issues. We need to improve the preconditions for, and access to, training and practice on operational issues. Important adults must be given the opportunity to gain high levels of competence and be provided with space to discuss with each other on asylum and return.

## How can we let the best interests of the child be decisive?

Children should be given the opportunity to express their views on issues concerning them. If the child does not express his or her views, his or her attitude should, as far as possible, be explored using other means. Since certain decisions cannot be influenced, it should be clear to the child that he or she is able to share his or her thoughts and experiences without being judged in any way.

We also need to seek contact with the child's family or network as early as possible.

As much information as possible must be made available when decisions about the best interests of the child are to be made and the motives for these decisions must be clearly formulated.

We know that there are different views on how weighty the best interests of the child can be in migration matters, and that there are different interpretations made by different actors. There should be a consensus so that it is understandable both for the child and for actors around them.

## How can we strive for equal opportunities for each child?

Decision-makers must have access to as much child-specific information as possible. The spirit of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child needs to permeate decision-making processes.

Here, strengthened collaboration within the municipality and between municipalities and the Swedish

Migration Agency is vital. There must be a basic level of knowledge and understanding<sup>21</sup> which can then be applied in each individual case. Everyone around the child needs to be at a common level of knowledge and ensure that correct information reaches them.

### **How to apply a holistic perspective to the child and his/her situation?**

We need to involve the children as much as possible in the processes, so that their voices and perspectives reach decision-makers.

From a holistic perspective, it is also important to remember that the child has had a life before coming to Sweden, seeking asylum through the Swedish Migration Agency and being placed in a municipality. It is important to understand and remember to, if possible, make contact with parents or other relatives. Regardless of who we meet, they have a life before our meeting. There may be parents or other important people in the child's life.

### **How to involve the child, the family and the network?**

It is important to start talking to the child early on about his/her previous life. One challenge is that, for various reasons, the child may not be able/willing to say everything. Through openness, without compromising anyone's security or integrity, we try to create opportunities to reconnect with family and networks. Adults around the child should create a sense of security so the children dare to involve those who are important in their lives. The child's family or network needs to understand what the child's situation is and how the asylum process works. It is also important to educate and involve, for example, the foster home.

### **How can this take place in collaboration with other professions and operations?**

The work with various forms of collaboration must be kept alive, not least when reception rates are currently low and children are rarely assigned to most of the municipalities in the country.

By establishing clear routines for collaboration in the reception of unaccompanied minors and defining who is responsible for organising such collaboration,

opportunities for reception with the child as central focus are increased.

We must know and respect each other's tasks and this must be the starting point in collaboration work going forward.

### **How to build on evidence-based practice?**

We will follow available research, studies and recommendations. Meeting unaccompanied children covers a variety of subject areas. We need an evidence-based approach and working method in our meetings with the children.

In order to work more specifically in return processes based on evidence, it is necessary that the issue is raised and raised at such a level that it leads to further research in the area.

### **How to counter difficulties and strengthen resources?**

We must strive to let the child's sense of context run throughout the process. Initially, the professional actors around the child need to be aware of the resources the child possesses. We increase manageability if the child feels that he or she has the resources to deal with adversity in life, for example having coped with tough events before or that there are secure people on hand when life becomes difficult. With the right support from the adult world, children in the return process can get help to understand their situation better and find resources to deal with what feels difficult both here and now and in the future. The adults can help the child gain the insight that life can be meaningful even though everything has not turned out as he or she intended.

### **How can we systematically follow the child and the inputs that concern him/her?**

Through planning and documentation, traceability and advance planning, follow-up and, not least, collaboration we can systematically follow the child and the inputs that are granted and implemented.

21 Collaboration Ladder *The Child's Best Interest during the Return Process* 2020

Operations need to ensure that there is knowledge and experience present in the day-to-day work.

During the years we worked with this project, through meetings with so many people and operations, we have gained a considerable amount of new knowledge and experience.

We believe that the previous recommendations from 2014 stand firm. We also remain steadfast in our conviction that it is the three pillars of information, discussion and collaboration remain the true basis of successful operations.

There are a few more aspects we especially want to point out to you all as readers of this report:

- We should not just meet every child where he or she is. One lesson we have learned is that in change work we also need to meet every adult, every organisation or activity where it is/they are.
- It is also clear that we all need to constantly remind ourselves to shift focus from ourselves to the child. We must apply a broader view and improve our ability to change perspectives.
- If we had only followed the media discourse in recent years as concerns unaccompanied children, it would be easy to believe that this group consisted only of boys of Afghan origin. Although a large proportion are boys originating in Afghanistan, it can be mentioned that in 2017 alone, unaccompanied children came to Sweden from 58 different countries. Just over 20 percent of these were girls. We need to broaden the perspective of the general debate. Unaccompanied children come to Sweden from all parts of the world, are of all ages, are of different genders and every single child counts!
- Every child must be met with the correct information, empathy, competence and compassion. The focus of the project has not been the return itself, but children's needs and rights and supporting and developing quality working methods around these children.
- All the actors in the child's network need to reach a consensus on what the child's best interests are, with the child's needs, wishes and development in focus.

- Although reception numbers have decreased, every young person is important. So there must be preparedness and routines established in each municipality to use whenever necessary.
- Each municipality must appoint a function that is responsible for collective knowledge, competence and maintaining an active or contingency plan for the reception of unaccompanied children.

At the time of writing, we are in the middle of a Covid-19 pandemic, in which the expression "hold on and hold out" is often used. Holding on and holding out, we feel correctly describes the mindset we need to maintain when working with children without guardians.

Regardless of whether a child is granted asylum or whether the child is facing return, the adult world just needs to "hold on and hold out". For the best interests of the child, we need to maintain our skills and knowledge, persevere in our role or function, even though it may feel difficult. We need to face the misguided benevolence that is rooted in our own emotional needs in favour of placing the child's needs centre stage. We must retain our interest in learning new things, and keep our commitment which must not be allowed to run out when the reception rate decreases. We must endure when the child's needs extend beyond what we think we can handle, during the difficult wait with uncertain outcome that the asylum and return process entails.

Finally, we need to hold on. Hold onto every child, every child is important and counts. We keep going, through empathic meetings where we are safe adults who work together and give the child correct information.

In the best interests of the child.

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[atervandande@stromsund.se](mailto:atervandande@stromsund.se)  
[www.begripligt.nu](http://www.begripligt.nu)  
[www.stromsund.se](http://www.stromsund.se)

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