

*“LIFE IS NOT JUST  
NORMAL AS BEFORE”*

COVID-19 AND DIGITAL  
SERVICE PROVISION IN  
THE CHARITY SECTOR:

A Case Study of the  
Refugee Council’s  
Children’s Section

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## Acronyms

CAP = Children's Advice Project

CMRB = Centre for Research on Migration, Refugees and Belonging

CS = Children's Section

DEAS = Digitally Enhanced Advances Services

RC = Refugee Council

YDP = Youth Development Project

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## Executive Summary

- Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, many charities have had to rapidly adapt their conventional model of providing face-to-face services and transition to using digital platforms.
- Using the Refugee Council Children's Section as a case study, the aim of the research is to examine the impact of the transition to digital service provision on service users and service providers.
- A mixed methods approach was applied including data mining, participant observation, and semi-structured interviews with ten practitioners and service users.
- Findings show that the Refugee Council (RC) adapted quickly to providing services online and service users greatly benefited from accessing them. Digital service provision also enabled the RC to increase its access to young people living in remote areas.
- Opportunities for informal discussions, building strong relationships and the digital divide among young people in care remain obstacles when working digitally.
- The recommendations of the study are to: develop a hybrid form of digital and in-person services; provide ongoing training on improving digital skills for practitioners and young people; improve online communication for staff and clients; support the provision of digital resources for young people.

## Introduction to the study

Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, lockdown restrictions and social distancing measures were applied across Europe and adults and children were encouraged to stay at home to prevent the spread of the virus. Many charities were forced to adapt and transition to online service provision: face-to-face support services (legal, educational, psychological and social) that were once provided in an office, community centre or village hall, were instead being offered in novel ways over WhatsApp, Zoom, Microsoft Teams, Skype and other digital communication platforms.

There was an increasing concern regarding the effect of Covid-19 on the lives of asylum seeking and refugee children, particularly those in care of social services; many were unable to continue in education or access support and advice because of limited access to the Internet and lack of digital resources (Durr et al., 2020). Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children who are uniquely positioned at the intersection of the care and asylum systems were likely to face additional obstacles in adapting to digital support due to language proficiency, IT literacy, lack of assistance and dependence on multiple services simultaneously.

Research on the experience of unaccompanied refugee youth accessing digital services during the Covid-19 pandemic is limited. Therefore, there is a need to understand the degree of efficiency and effectiveness of digital service provision within the charity sector, specifically for refugee youth, and the extent to which it will influence service delivery in the future.

This research was carried out in partnership between the Centre for Migration, Refugees and Belonging (CMRB) at the University of East London (UEL) and the RC, the leading charity supporting refugees in the UK. The RC Children's Section exclusively supports unaccompanied children in the UK by providing asylum and welfare advice, psychosocial activities and therapeutic services. In 2018 the Children's Section supported over 3,000 unaccompanied children (Refugee Council, 2021).

## Aim and Objectives

The overall aim of the project is to examine the impact of the transition to digital service provision on service users and service providers within the RC Children's Section. The objectives are to:

- a) Collate data from young service users on their accessibility and usage of digital services to improve decision making in the transition to digital service provision.
- b) Examine challenges of digital service provision through the collection of RC staff/service users' data to evaluate how technology can be leveraged to improve and develop new services.

- c) Extract lessons from the case study to improve digital operations and outcomes.
- d) Develop an effective case study of digital service provision within the charity sector.

## Adapting to Digital

According to the Charity Digital Skills Report (2020), the Covid-19 pandemic has encouraged charities 'to embrace digital to stay relevant' thus consequently 66% of charities are now delivering all services remotely. Charities are eager to digitise their services; they are keen to learn how they can help service users access services online; they want guidance on what services can be digitised successfully and they are also keen to support their colleagues in adjusting to working remotely. The need for upskilling is essential with one in five charities demonstrating low skills in this area. For charities to increase their use of digital they will need to invest, research the needs of their services users when it comes to accessing digital services and also find ways to help service users who do not have access to technology and the internet.

A study carried out by Partnership for Young London (2020) examined the importance of internet access in the daily lives of 89 young people in care during the Covid-19 pandemic. The majority of young people agreed that the internet is essential to their everyday lives however over a third stated that their connection fails every day. They stated that the internet is important so they can access education, employment opportunities, entertainment and socialise with friends and family; it is also essential for their mental health. Most of the young people interviewed believed that lockdown has had a negative effect on their mental health, and they have suffered from isolation; seeking mental health support was said to be harder since the pandemic. Furthermore, most young people said that communication with their support workers has changed since lockdown and they now rely on emails and online calls.

The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the daily lives of unaccompanied children is unique as they are reliant on multiple systems and services. An information document titled Covid-19 & Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children demonstrates that the pandemic has exacerbated not only general challenges faced by unaccompanied asylum-seeking youth e.g., asylum, accommodation, education, resettlement and health, but more importantly it identifies specific challenges in accessing digital care such as lack of smart phones and laptops, costly data packages, and lack of digital skills (Nanton, 2020).

## Methodology

The study adopted a mixed methods approach. Data mining of RC policies and strategies was carried out. Participant observation was undertaken over five months by the Research Assistant, a part-time Children's Adviser at the RC. In-depth, semi-structured interviews with five RC practitioners specialising in asylum and welfare advice, therapy and youth work were undertaken. A further five in-depth interviews were carried out with RC service users on accessibility, feasibility, and their usage of digital services. Interview schedules were created for staff and young people (see appendix 2&3) and additional questions were included depending on answers given by the participant. Informal conversations with colleagues as well as attendance at Children Section meetings also aided with the interpretation of the findings.

Participants were located through the RC's Children's Section and the Head of Children's Services agreed to facilitate access to staff and service users. Purposeful sampling was used to identify participants. All participants were interviewed over Microsoft Teams or Zoom. Service users that were interviewed were familiar with using technology as they had all been accessing RC services remotely. Interviews were transcribed and thematic analysis was used to identify key themes.

Adopting the ethics of care standpoint (Taggart, 2016), participation was voluntary. Anonymity and confidentiality were maintained throughout the study. In line with the principles of care, service users were compensated for their time and involvement, and when needed they were signposted to relevant services. Informal communications with stakeholders were ongoing throughout. Ethical issues were carefully addressed through the UEL Research Ethics Committee process and negotiated with participants. Service users were invited to have an interpreter present however they all declined. All interviews with service users were carried out by a Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) checked researcher.

The five young people who were interviewed were aged between 16 and 20, and were from Angola (1), Afghanistan (3) and Guinea (1). The five staff were Children's Advisers (2), Youth Worker (1), Senior Adviser (1) and Children's Therapist (1).

The key findings of the study are presented in the next section and are organised in three sections: the first is an overview of the RC Children Section's transition to working remotely and the second and third sections analyse the opportunities and challenges of providing advice and support online.





## The Transition to Providing Advice and Support Online Amidst the Pandemic

- Resources

The RC Children's Section responded quickly and efficiently to the Covid-19 pandemic and subsequent government enforced lockdowns. All offices across the country closed and services transitioned online. The RC ensured laptops, mobiles, office chairs and other working-from-home essentials were made available and offered staff the possibility of using the furlough scheme where needed. The Senior Children's Adviser remarked:

**I think we managed to adapt very quickly, everyone had their laptops, everyone had their phones. IT worked things out, we started using Zoom, teams figured ways to meet. [...] It was quite remarkable in a way.**

Practitioners were resilient in their response and rapidly switched to working with young people digitally.

- Digital Skills

As services began to transition online, many young people needed to learn basic computer skills as they were computer illiterate. Foster carers and key workers were often relied upon to support them with this, as highlighted by the Youth Worker:

**Usually, we get in touch with key workers, foster carers and they try and help them or teach [them]. And because most of them are young, they learn quite quickly, so after three weeks or so they get more independent.**

Young people relied on those around them to teach them the necessary skills, as one young person explains:

**My foster carer is so good with me, like, she helped me with the things that I don't know. She tell me about the things, how things work.**

For many young people, the support from foster carers became essential in adapting and accessing online services.

For practitioners, IT support was available online or over the phone and staff were provided with Zoom and Microsoft Teams accounts. Training sessions on how to use these communication platforms were also available.

- Funding

With the sudden realisation that lockdown was to continue for considerably longer than expected, additional funding was sourced to ensure young people who needed phone credit, data or other essentials could be supported. One of the Children's Advisers highlighted:

**A lot of young people were running out of phone credit right at the start of lockdown [...]. Local authorities aren't providing Wi-Fi or aren't providing remote access for education so young people were relying on their phones to hotspot. If they've got a laptop or not got a laptop, they are relying on their phones entirely. So, we were running a phone credit scheme which was just top-ups for young people that really needed to contact a solicitor, really needed a therapist, and didn't have any other way of doing it.**

As some local authorities were slow in responding to the digital needs of young people, the RC's phone credit scheme along with laptop donations were essential to keeping young people connected to services.

- Nationalising Services

Given that an increasing number of young people across the country were becoming digitally literate, the Youth Development Project (YDP), which provides psycho-social and educational classes, realised that it could expand from being a London-based project to running nationwide. The Senior Adviser noted how beneficial it has been for young people who are living in isolated parts of the country to now have access to this service:

**I work with people who are placed honestly in the middle of nowhere like the places I would never have any reason to go [...]. The fact that the youth group is now available to them is a good development.**

The creation of the virtual YDP allowed young people across the country to benefit from this specialist service.

- Mental Health

Due to the increased need for mental health support during the pandemic, the My View therapy service adapted their way of working. The Therapist stated that:

**We will check in on them [...] offer them a couple more sessions [...]. You know we had it, but we didn't really do crisis**

**interventions before [...]. We didn't do phoning up clients on the waiting list and offering them a one-hour crisis intervention. But we do that now, which is important. I've also introduced on our spreadsheet a red cross next to clients that I think are urgent, or you know, flag up in an urgent case. So that's slightly different.**

Ensuring young people had access to mental health support was essential as the pandemic presented yet another obstacle in their complex lives.

The above shows the adaptability and resilience of the service users and service providers during the transition from face-to-face to online service delivery. The RC Children's Section rapidly digitised its services to ensure it could continue to meet the needs of the young people and the determination of the practitioners to support the young people, coupled with the funding and support provided at an organisational level, meant that those needs could be met.

The following section will highlight the benefits of working remotely and offering services online.

## “We can actually take some positives from being online”

- Accessibility

The study shows that there are clear benefits to delivering services online: it increases access to young people living in remote areas and it speeds up operations and facilitates communications. Team meetings and appointments with young people could be carried out online which saved time thus increasing the capacity of practitioners to take on more cases. The Senior Children’s Adviser highlighted the advantage of services being digitised:

**The clear advantages are that we can see clients that we didn’t used to be able to see because they lived too far away. [...] The [fact that the] therapist can do sessions with people remotely has drastically reduced the waiting list and made it genuinely accessible for people who can’t travel to Leeds once a week for therapy.**

Although the RC Children’s Section had offices across the UK, many young people did not have the means or the time after school or college to visit the service. Therefore, the Children’s Section became more accessible as a digital service.

- A comfortable space

For young people, being able to access services in their own space and time was also considered an advantage. One young person stated:

**Some people cannot speak in front of people, so it's a good chance to speak...you think that nobody is going to see me like I'm just talking. Like you are comfortable in your own space, you can, you can wear whatever you want [...] I like it online because you don't have to wake up early in the morning to go there and like we can do it online as well.**

Accessing services online allowed this young person to feel confident and at ease speaking with his peers.

- YDP Online – increased connection and improved wellbeing

The transition of the YDP online was a significant benefit to the RC Children’s Section as young people living outside of London could be invited to access English and Maths classes as well as other youth activities. The Youth Worker explained:

**Now with the online [classes] we have young people from Manchester, Leeds, Hull, Brighton, so it's been amazing to have young people from everywhere.**

The young people hugely benefited from having access to the youth activities as they felt lonely and isolated during the pandemic. This young person describes his experience of attending the English classes:

**At first, I was thinking like how will the class went online, we didn't do online class before, like how will it went and how will do but it was pretty good like I made a lot of friends there. I like with Refugee Council. I will say like with my lockdown went well with Refugee Council, without Refugee Council it would be so bad.**

Youth activities became a source of escapism from the daily stressors caused by the pandemic and it allowed the young people to feel connected at a time when they could not socialise with their friends. It also gave the young people a sense of routine and structure to their day:

**At first when the lockdown start like my sleep was not as good. Like before, we don't know which time I sleep which time I wake up, but with Refugee Council like my routine was a bit good.**

Refugee Council services were invaluable to the young people during a period of increased uncertainty; they created a sense of stability and gave structure to their lives.

Covid-19 has given charities an opportunity to discover new ways of working to support their clients. RC practitioners realised the benefits of working digitally in their individual roles and young people greatly valued RC services being available online.

The next section will present the challenges of offering services online and working remotely.



## “There have been a lot of challenges”

The transition from face-to-face to digital service delivery was novel to the RC Children’s Section and whilst staff and young people managed to adapt and remain resilient, several challenges arose.

- Digital inequality

At the start of the pandemic, many young people did not have access to laptops and were using their mobile phones to access education and other services. The Senior Children’s Adviser explained:

**The vast majority of young people are in contact with us over the phone and that’s just because, outside of young people in foster care who might be able to access a zoom meeting or a video call, most young people do not have the technology to access that.**

Furthermore, there is a disparity in funding and resources between local authorities across the country as well as a notable difference in the amount of digital support that is being provided. The Senior Children’s Adviser highlighted:

**It's pretty unequal which is a shame. It's just a few different lottery systems that young people are in [...] first of all, which local authority you're with because some just seem to have more resources like they seem to have less busy social workers [...] and some of them are getting provided laptops and stuff earlier on.**

Funding for digital resources will need to increase if services continue to operate online otherwise young people in care risk being marginalized and cut off from important services.

- Building relationships

RC Practitioners believed that relationship building and creating trust with clients is more challenging when working digitally. The Senior Adviser stated:

**When you meet someone face to face it's obviously easier to build a relationship [...], and you're not just a voice on the end on the phone and you can see the demeanour of young people. Often a lot of things like safeguarding issues are much easier to spot in person because you can see someone's behaviour as well as what they're telling you because people don't...you know the first time you speak with someone they're not usually just gonna share lots of stuff off the bat.**

Another Adviser noted:

**I think the negative is that the young people we work with need a lot of emotional support and it is really difficult to provide the emotional support they need via a screen or an app.**

Providing emotional support and building rapport with young people face-to-face did not easily translate when working online. The Advisers suggest that this was an obstacle they faced while working remotely.

- Trust

Building relationships with young people also occurs in the informality of interactions outside scheduled classes or meetings. The Youth Worker stated that young people would often confide in staff in informal ad hoc conversations that would usually happen before or after English or Maths classes. Yet this is very difficult to recreate when working online:

**Pre Covid, we used to have the young people in contact with us more often, they come to the centre and play, talk to us when they need, if they have any problems. Now we have access to them just during the classes, it's not really a great amount of time, so it's really hard to build up this kind of connection and professional friendship and build up this trust so they can come and talk to us about their problems and feel like [they have] a kind of family.**

Building trust is a key part of working with young people. RC Practitioners want young people to feel they can trust the RC to support them in all aspects of their lives. However, it was clear that it is difficult to create trust when speaking to young people over the phone or via a laptop.

- Online learning

Young people who were in college before the pandemic struggled to adapt to their online classes and consequently missed out on a significant amount of education. One young person explained why he found it difficult:

**I couldn't focus online [...] it was really hard to focus on all these studies and I didn't learn anything to be honest because I just, I just attended a few classes, but it was really boring for me. [...]. I would have done anything to go to my college to attend my classes. But online classes were like it was your choice. So, it was this. For that reason, I wasn't able to focus on my studies. It was a bit hard.**

Other young people who were in college expressed the same difficulty, they were distracted and needed the presence of a teacher to help them concentrate. Several also mentioned that it was difficult understanding English when they could not see the teacher face-to-face.

- IT challenges

Practitioners were sometimes expected to assist young people with IT issues if there was no one available in person to support the young person. The Therapist reported feeling helpless when this arose:

**When your technology breaks down, when your Wi-Fi goes haywire, when you spend 55 minutes out of a 50 minute session not being able to see each other and ending up going ‘Oh well, look, let's not worry about this let's just meet next week’.**

Technical difficulties and limited IT support meant that sessions were sometimes disrupted or missed completely.

- Impact of the pandemic on wellbeing and motivation to access online services

The impact of the pandemic and national lockdowns resulted in some young people disengaging and losing motivation to take part in online activities. The Youth Worker explained how some young people known to their service before the pandemic did not take well to the sessions being online:

**We struggled at the beginning to reach out to the young people and encourage them online and we lost a lot of young people that used to be very regular to the face-to-face activities. Most of them aren't interested in online sessions, especially the older ones.**

Some of the young people who attended the classes still found it challenging as they missed socialising in-person and this was affecting their mood. The Youth Worker stated:

**There have been a lot of challenges for them but also most of them have been feeling low, not being able to go out and most of them when we say to them ‘how do you feel today?’ they say ‘oh its really boring, we can't go out, we can't meet friends’. And for the new ones there have been a lot of challenges because since they arrived here, they are not meeting friends, they are not making friends so it's a lack of human connection. Of course, this opportunity we are giving them is better than nothing but it's a really sad time for them.**



The pandemic was taking its toll on the mental health of the young people and although many benefited from accessing the services online, it was clear that the young people longed to see their friends in person.

- Informal interaction with colleagues

Although RC Practitioners adapted well to working remotely, they stated that they missed informal conversations and socialising with colleagues:

**I think it's a sort of a shame that we did have one period, I think when we all used to meet in the lunch hour or something then that stopped happening and I think that's a shame.**

Another was unaware of any opportunity for colleagues to chat informally to one another:

**I think there was not a lot of communication like social things, like to do social things like catch up.**

Socialising at work was important to practitioners and opportunities to do this online were lacking.

- Boundaries

Some Practitioners stated that they found it difficult to switch off from work whilst working from home. One Adviser stated:

**It has been quite difficult managing the feeling that there's an infinite amount of work to do and if you're working from home there's almost an infinite capacity to do it.**

The Adviser suggests that when you have a high workload, there are no boundaries in place to prevent overworking.

Although RC Practitioners and service users adapted well to the transition of services being online, it evidently brought with it many challenges, most notably replicating face-to-face interactions and informal communication.



## Case Studies

This section contains two case studies from the points of view of two young people who accessed the RC's online services during the Covid-19 pandemic.

### Ajab's experience

Ajab, a 16-year-old unaccompanied asylum-seeking boy from Afghanistan arrived two weeks before the first UK lockdown. He was accommodated with a foster carer and spent his first few weeks recovering from his journey. He heard that there was a pandemic and felt confused and unsure of how to react. He spoke to his foster carer and social worker and looked on social media for information about it. During the lockdown he felt stressed and struggled from having a lack of routine; he was also bored and struggled to sleep. However, his foster carer put him in touch with the Refugee Council who then gave him a laptop which allowed him to access their services. He joined the online ESOL classes and social evenings which helped him make friends and have fun. Ajab also realised that he felt more confident and at ease accessing classes online as he was in his own space and could wear what he wanted without people judging him.

Ajab is now attending college and appreciates the benefits of being with people in person. He has also stayed in touch with the friends he made online.

### Maria's experience

Maria, a 20-year-old unaccompanied asylum-seeking girl from Guinea, reflected on how Covid-19 has changed her daily life. She studies IT in college but due to the pandemic, all her lessons were moved online. She found it difficult working alone and not having a teacher who she could easily ask questions to. As English is not her first language, she struggled to understand everything that was asked of her and she found studying online stressful.

Maria became deeply distressed by watching news reports on the pandemic and seeing the daily death rate. It made her feel lonely and she cried often. She also used to volunteer; she worked in charity shops and did hair braiding, and she missed not being able to do these things. The stress of not having received a decision on her asylum claim was also adding to her difficult situation.

However, Maria attended the RC Girls Group during lockdown which brought her happiness and respite. She loved laughing with the other girls and joining in the online activities. Prior to the pandemic she found it difficult to attend regularly as her college was far from the RC office but as it was moved online, she managed to get the support from the other girls which she really needed during this time. It improved her mental health and made her feel less isolated.

## Recommendations

- Hybrid services

Developing a hybrid form of digital and in-person services will ensure young people in remote areas can continue to access RC services and at the same time will allow staff to build trusting relationships through face-to-face support.

- Digital Training and Upskilling

Digital skills among staff and young people will need to be maintained to ensure the provision of online services can be delivered to a high standard.

Training on how to provide emotional support and empathy through digital services is recommended as Advisers find it difficult to replicate online.

- Communication

It is recommended that the RC creates opportunities for informal discussions online and digital meetups whilst working remotely (for both clients and staff).

- Digital Resources

Designing and creating a RC app or a digital asylum map translated into several languages would be of benefit to RC clients.

- Funding

Source funding to ensure clients can access services online.

- Digital equality

Raise awareness of digital inequality and work with local authorities to ensure young people have internet access and laptops/phones so they can access online services/ education.

## Conclusion

The research showed that the RC adapted well and took advantage of the opportunities working online presented. It also outlined current obstacles in the digitisation of services and provided recommendations for the ongoing transition to online and hybrid service provision. This project addressed a gap in the understanding of how charities, specifically the RC, transitioned to online service delivery during the Covid-19 pandemic. The case study of the RC can offer insights for the charity sector working with refugee youth.

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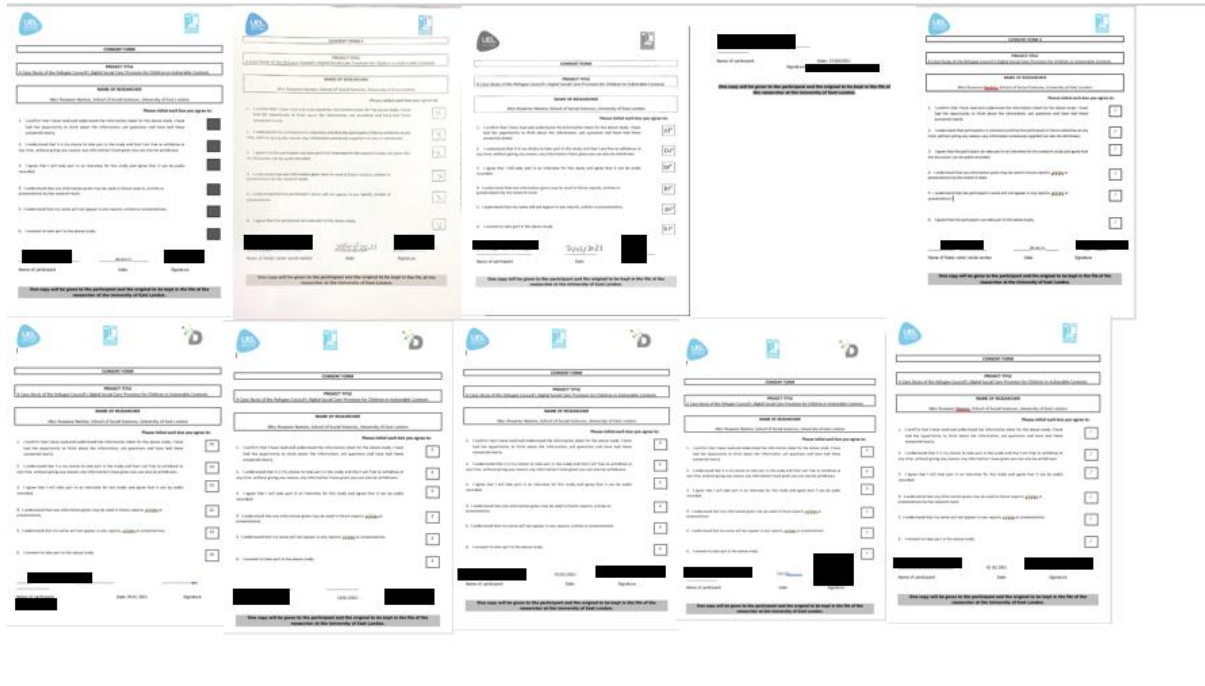
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# Appendices

## Appendix 1 – Ethics



## Appendix 2 – Questions to Practitioners

1. Can you tell me about your role at the Refugee Council?
2. How has your role been affected by Covid-19 and the national lockdowns? How has it affected the young people you work with?
3. How has your role changed from working face-to-face to working remotely? How has it changed for the children?
4. How was the transition, what was your experience? How was it for the children? (what worked what didn't work?)
5. In transitioning to the new way of working, what role has the RC played? (How has the Refugee Council supported you financially/ emotionally etc? How has that worked for you and the children?)
6. How has the transition affected the charity sector? What are the experiences of others in the charity sector? (have you attended meetings with others/ informal conversations/ forum network meeting?)

7. This project looks at advanced digital technologies, do any of these examples make sense? Give example of AI, apps etc
8. What impact would using these technologies have on supporting children? Do we want to take away the 'human' element of providing services to children/ what impact does it have on the safety of the children (digitally-mediated safeguarding)?
9. What do you think can be done to improve the way you deliver your services digitally and also beyond digital / in your daily life at the Refugee Council?

### Appendix 3 – Questions to Young People

1. Can you start by telling me your age/ country of origin/ if you are in foster care or semi-independent accommodation/ how long in UK?
2. Can you think back to life before Covid – how was this for you? What were you doing then?
3. Covid happened and we had the first lockdown. Can you remember what that was like? How did you feel? What happened then?
4. Can you remember when lockdown ended? What was it like?
5. We then had two more lockdowns. Can you remember them? Have they been different?
6. What were the main things that happened to you/ what changed in your life?

#### Service provision

1. During this time have you accessed/ been in touch with:
  - Asylum Advice at the RC?
  - Youth Activities i.e. social evenings/ music class?
  - Therapy?
  - ESOL/ Maths classes?

#### How did these services change?

2. Do you attend any other services provided by charities like the Red Cross or Young Roots? What has that been like?
3. How has support been from social services since lockdown/ do you see your social worker/ key worker? Did anything change?
4. Have you had to spend more time in your accommodation? What has it been like?
5. Did you go to school before lockdown?
6. Has Covid had an impact on your asylum case?

#### Technology

1. Do you have a smart phone? Laptop? Wifi? Data?
2. Did you always have a laptop/ smart phone? Is it easy to use?
3. What apps do you use?
4. Do you have somewhere where you can study/ use your laptop?
5. Do you like using your phone/ laptop to access services?
6. Can we change anything at Refugee Council to make online services better?