

English summary
of Fafo-rapport 2021:34

An evaluation of
the immigration
administration's work
with children and
competence in this area

An evaluation of the immigration administration's work with children and competence in this area

In 2017, key players in the immigration administration – the Norwegian Directorate of Immigration (UDI), the Immigration Appeals Board (UNE) and the National Police Immigration Service (PU) – were commissioned to enhance the competence in the work with children 'throughout the asylum chain'. The Norwegian parliament, Storting, passed a resolution in 2016 that led to funds being earmarked for this purpose, which was also continued in 2018 and 2019. However, the intention behind the funds to enhance competence in this area was not clearly defined by politicians or by the department responsible; the Ministry of Justice and Public Security.

Increasing the competence in the work with children throughout the asylum chain can be described as an 'open assignment'. Because of how the funds were earmarked and how the Ministry has governed its subordinate agencies' use of the funds, much of the work of defining and delimiting the work (including the changes to be made) has been done by the agencies themselves.

The UDI, UNE and PU have worked both individually and together to explore needs, design measures and carry out the task of enhancing the competence in the work with children throughout the asylum chain. These efforts have included formulating a number of goals for what changes they would like to be made (but not a collective overarching goal). This work has had two 'strands', one of which has entailed looking at children's user journey and perspective in order to develop suitable measures. The point of departure for the other strand has been the work of employees and the variation in competence in the relevant area. The result has been a broad range of measures directly aimed at children (with an emphasis on information measures) and at employees' knowledge, skills, working methods and access to material resources, guidance, written procedures, training materials and other resources. Efforts to raise awareness of recently developed tools and resources and ensure that they are used in practice are still ongoing in the three agencies.

Commission and research design

Fafo was commissioned by the UDI to evaluate this work. The immigration administration wanted to know whether the measures they have introduced using the earmarked funds have led to improvements from two important, but different,

English summary of Fafo-rapport 2021:34
An evaluation of the immigration administration's work
with children and competence in this area
Ragna Lillevik, Nerina Weiss and Lene Christin Holum

© Fafo 2021

perspectives: the children's perspective and the perspective of employees in the immigration administration. The main questions were as follows:

1. To what extent have the implemented measures and activities enhanced the immigration administration employees' competence in the work with children? And how has this manifested itself?
- To what extent have the implemented measures and activities improved the process for children as users in their dealings with the immigration administration?

In preparing this report, we used a combination of qualitative and quantitative evaluation methods to assess both the process and the effects of the implemented measures. Our overarching framework was based on theory of change (Rogers, 2014), which is an evaluation method suitable for understanding the relationship between cause and effect (Ebrahim et al. 2010). It is also a tool for individuals to reflect on their own thoughts and understandings and those of others in relation to what change the tools are to achieve, and how such change should be able to take place (Stern et al., 2012).

Based on the theory of change, we have divided the project into three phases, where we have approached the issues using various qualitative and quantitative methods. The aim of the project is to evaluate the effects of the measures in their entirety, and the interplay between the measures. In order to form a complete picture of experiences – in terms of implementation, use and impact – we have used an online survey aimed at all employees in PU, UDI and UNE. Qualitative interviews at management level have given us important insights into the implementation processes, the cooperation between the different bodies and the purpose of the various measures.

In addition, we wanted to examine two measures in depth – the website asylbarn.no and training in interviewing children – to get a better understanding of the process and the correlations between objectives and impact. These two measures were examined via both the aforementioned survey and qualitative methods. We have observed interviews with children and conducted a total of 48 qualitative interviews with employees in the immigration administration, children and adolescents living in asylum reception centres, and representatives of unaccompanied minor asylum seekers (persons who are appointed as legal substitutes for parents when applying for asylum). We were also given access to and analysed a selection of audio recordings of asylum interviews with minors. In addition, we have carried out several evaluation workshops as part of this project in order to ensure a good dialogue about research findings as the project progressed.

Main findings

In summary, we find that all three agencies have used substantial resources in the efforts to enhance competence in the area discussed. They have engaged internal and external experts in the field to help develop effective and relevant measures, and all departments have shown great dedication to the work, in particular with strong encouragement from the staff and project managers in agencies responsible for the work with children. The three agencies have also achieved a great deal with the financial resources they were allocated; employees have received training, a number of tools have been developed for use in discretionary decision-making in the work with children and adolescents, and professionally designed information measures have been developed aimed directly at children in the asylum chain, based on needs identified by the children themselves.

We found that the majority of employees who have received training in interviewing children and basic skills in working with children have a positive view of how this has benefitted their work, and that employees who have received such training feel better equipped to deal with their encounters with children in the asylum chain. However, our review of a sample of asylum interviews with children shows that not everyone who conducts such interviews manages to use research-based methods in these conversations, either because they do not have the relevant competence or because they are unable to apply it properly. This indicates that skills in conducting interviews with children should continue to be developed and applied in the UDI, and probably also in the other agencies, as this is a skill that requires training and updating. Our review of the asylum interviews also shows that when carried out well, they help children to provide input on their case and provide information that can be important for the work of the immigration administration. We also found that the website that has been developed to provide information directly to the children, asylbarn.no, is considered to be useful by immigration administration staff. Although work still needs to be done to ensure systematic use of the website, we have also found that the Norwegian Organisation for Asylum Seekers (NOAS) uses it actively in all information meetings with children, and considers it to be a useful tool.

The immigration administration's efforts to enhance competence in its work with children has led to the development of a raft of what we can call new tools for use in discretionary decision-making. These give employees access to a range of new aids that facilitate their work with children and adolescents in the asylum chain, which often requires discretion to be exercised in order to meet the children's needs and protect their rights. This includes material resources, such as websites and online or printed guides; intangible resources, such as knowledge, understanding and insight; and new or improved working methods and techniques, such as interview techniques adapted to children of different ages who are seeking asylum alone or with their family. Greater awareness and the

larger range of tools available to employees can facilitate change in the immigration administration's practices. However, the report also shows that it is, to some extent, up to the individual employee to use these tools, and that there are some obstacles, such as lack of adaptation of physical premises, other areas being given a higher priority, and challenges related to cooperation with external actors. The most obvious change in practice can be found in PU's work with children during deportation, which has probably had a major impact on children's experiences during their final encounter with the immigration administration.

Recommendations for further implementation of competence in the work with children

The efforts to enhance competence in the work with children should be continued

The efforts to enhance skills need to be institutionalised in order to ensure a long-term effect. The large staff turnover in the immigration agencies also makes it necessary to plan for long-term implementation work. Efforts should therefore be continued. Consideration should be given to whether it is appropriate to use earmarked funds to maintain the focus on children and competence in the work with children in the agencies.

The goals should be defined

There is a need for clear, evaluable goals that define what skills immigration administration staff should have and what they should be used for. This is necessary to assess whether employees have the desired competence and to ascertain what needs to be further developed and improved.

Anchored in management

Parts of the immigration agency are currently being restructured, and the work should therefore be anchored in any new management.

Ensure a good structural framework

Permanent structures should be established to safeguard the competence in the work with children and the focus on children and adolescents in the asylum process. The immigration administration has already established a network for those working with children, and the agencies have dedicated coordinators. These arrangements should be continued and provided for in governing documents. Consideration should be given to expanding such structures if deemed necessary.

Interview training should be offered to more employees in the immigration agencies

We found that training makes people feel better equipped in their encounters with children. We therefore recommend that, as a general rule, everyone who interacts with children completes the training – including staff at asylum reception centres.

Training in interviewing children should also include practical experience

Practical experience and training are needed to develop such competence. In order to ensure that the immigration administration's work with children is of a high standard, supervised practice is needed in the form of feedback on interviews; either via video recordings or through the presence of a supervisor/mentor who gives feedback afterwards.

Training should be ensured through long-term arrangements and agreements

Training and guidance in competence in the work with children (including the interview course) should be ensured through long-term agreements. This can be done in various ways, either by entering into an agreement with experts in the private sector or by commissioning specialist organisations (such as the regional centres on violence, traumatic stress and suicide prevention (RVTS) or Pilar, whose mandate includes such work). It is crucial that course providers have in-depth knowledge of the various tasks and processes in the immigration administration.

Regular evaluation of competence in the work with children

Internal quality control routines should include regular assessments of the agencies' competence in the work with children to ensure that the competence satisfies the agencies' needs and remains current.

Ensure that children receive good, timely information about asylbarn.no

In order for asylbarn.no to work as intended, it is important that children are informed about asylbarn.no at the start of the asylum process and that they have the opportunity to become acquainted with the tool. It needs to be made clearer to the agencies that the website is to be used in the work with children.

Videos should reflect real interview scenarios, including remote interviews

Children and adolescents need as real a picture of the interview situation as possible. On several occasions, the immigration administration has had to conduct

interviews remotely. It is therefore recommended that videos are made showing remote interview situations.

Conducting user surveys of children

Asylbarn.no should be evaluated by means of a user survey of children in the target group (qualitative and/or quantitative) to investigate how and to what extent the website is used, and whether it covers the children's need for information.

Recommendations for improving the process for children

Ensure that all children receive good, tailored information about their right to be heard throughout the asylum process

Children need good, tailored information about their right to be heard and the purpose of the interview. While this is thoroughly explained before the asylum interview by NOAS, there is still room for improvement in the information given prior to the registration interview with PU and any hearings with UNE. Asylbarn.no is a useful tool in this respect, and steps should be taken to ensure that children (and their families) have access to the information on the website throughout the asylum process.

Ensure that children receive good, tailored information about how their input could have implications for the family's case

Children must be given realistic information about the implications of their input if major discrepancies are found between their explanation and that of their parents. Children must also be informed that while their input cannot on its own be used as a basis for assessment, caseworkers will carry out various investigations where contradictions arise in the interview with the child.

Prioritisation of unaccompanied minors in the arrival phase should not be at the expense of children and adolescents' need for rest and safety

The aim of prioritizing unaccompanied minor's asylum case should not override other considerations that need to be made in the best interests of the child. All children need rest and should be able to feel safe in their dealings with the immigration administration. It is therefore important that the immigration administration takes this into account in the arrival phase, for example by ensuring that children and adolescents do not have to spend long days at the arrival centre. When planning the initial registration, travel time from the care centre or reception centre to the national arrival centre should therefore be factored in, in addition to sufficient time for rest. If it becomes clear that the initial registration will

take too long, this and the ID and registration interview should take place over two days. It is important that these interviews are conducted in person.

Children's needs and security must be ensured when conducting remote interviews

The representative should be present with the child during remote interviews. It is important that children always know who is on the other side of the camera.

Ensure that children are well supported after the interview

Good information flows between the reception centre and the immigration administration, as well as good communication with parents and representatives is essential to ensure that children receive the follow-up they need after discussing difficult issues.

Develop templates for clear, tailored information about the interview

The immigration administration should prepare child-friendly templates for how to frame and explain different interview situations to children. For example, in relation to the agency's task and the role of the interviewer, and not least the purpose of the interview.