

# StandAlone

Supporting Students



**'I thought that I was beginning to leave my family mess behind, but now I have encountered it all over again.' – Willow**

As the founder of Stand Alone, I have sat and read many e-mails from our friends and beneficiaries. The quote that I have chosen above is from one of the first e-mails that I recieved, imploring the charity to do something about the struggles they were facing in evidencing their family estrangement for Student Finance.

After reading more mails like this, I began to see that these young adults were unnecessarily suffering in their attempts to fulfil their academic potential and lead independent lives. Every week there seemed to be another case detailing the same feelings of frustration with a system that was said to lack awareness of their position and their needs.

After further discussions with the NUS, it seemed these difficulties that students were facing could not only be attributed to the policies of the funding body at large. Although, they do have something to do with it. To me, it seemed these difficulties were equally a product of a lack of advocacy, as no dedicated charity had existed to facilitate better understanding of family estrangement for organisations such as Student Finance England.

Thus, this report is written in the hope of starting a collaborative relationship between Stand Alone and Student Finance England, and to build on the suggestions of the NUS in previous reports. It is hoped this relationship may lead to practices which both protect public funds and pose less risk to students who have made the difficult decision to cut contact with their family.

I would like to extend my thanks to all that have given their time to help with this report, particularly those at Student Finance England. As a small charity, we rely on the consultancy of larger organisations, and in this instance we would like to thank NAPAC for their ongoing support and advice.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Becca Bland', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Becca Bland, Chief Executive

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## **Executive Summary**

At time of writing there are over 9,000 students that have applied for or been granted independent status as 'estranged from parents' within the Student Finance system. These students are considered independent, and in most instances receive the maximum possible maintenance grant in light of the fact that have no contact with their parents, and do not have the facility to be means tested on their parent's income.

Although the presence of such a bracket is a fundamentally positive aspect of student support, each student that applies through this route must regularly provide evidence of their family estrangement. This is assessed on a case by case basis, and evidence must be re-submitted for assessment each academic year. The current guidelines show a bias towards evidence from a 'trusted' person, such as a doctor, police, social worker or teacher. However, previous cases have shown that there is a certain element of flexibility in these guidelines.

Progress has been made in light of previous research, such as the NUS report, *Evaluating Estrangement*, published in 2008. In the six years since this report, the processing of student support applications has become centralised and all evidence is assessed by a dedicated processing team in Darlington. Some of the NUS recommendations have remained valid in this context, and practices such as asking a student for a letter from their parents are no-longer part of the guidelines for evidence. This isn't to say that such letters are not requested. It is also noted that some guidance on the wording of letters to be used as evidence is provided.

Stand Alone's report will explore both the position of the estranged student and conclude on research carried out with our clinical board and our focus group of student beneficiaries. This report has been built around the principle of minimising risk to the student, and tackles less the nuances of evidence guidelines, but the lack of support in the system as a whole. This report is focussed for the most part on Student Finance England, although it will go on to explore a collaborative approach from other stakeholders in minimising risk of homelessness during the summer period. Our research has concluded that the system of providing evidence and the guidance for estranged students should be explored under the following three titles.

**Burden.** The burden of searching for evidence of family estrangement in an unsupported fashion does not minimise the risks of harm to the student. Regulations that require the vulnerable student to further prove their estrangement each academic year do nothing further to minimise risk of potential harm to the student in this sense and could be said to increase it.

**Inconsistency.** The inconsistencies in decisions from differing SFE processing personnel do not minimise the risk of harm to the student. Consistent advice from Student Finance England is difficult to attain and the lack of single operative to deal with cases does not minimise the risk to the student.

Accountability. The lack of provision over the summer months does not minimise the risk of harm to the student during these periods and also periods where they are in attendance. Furthermore, the amount of maintenance grant as it stands does not maximise the potential for academic progress.

Following exploration in the areas outlined, Stand Alone has generated points of action for consideration for the SFE. These are expanded in greater practical detail later in this report. If students are to be asked to provide evidence of their family estrangement to Student Finance England each year, the organisation must be aware of and take a certain amount of responsibility for the risks to mental wellbeing that this process may pose. Stand Alone would suggest Student Finance England work with the charity and its partners to build more consistent, structured and reliable support for students during this process. Thus, Stand Alone has suggested the following courses of action:

1. A dedicated Freephone helpline to support students whilst they search for evidence, and to provide guidance on cases should be put in place;
2. Better guidance online and offline is recommended in the form of a dedicated website or microsite that details case studies and past experiences;
3. Structured third party intervention for those students that feel the process of gathering evidence of their family estrangement would pose too large a risk to their mental/physical wellbeing;
4. Pursuing changes to regulations for the re-submission of evidence for each academic year;
5. Further research to conclude on the relationship between the re-submission of evidence and retention rates of students estranged from their family;
6. Improvements in guidelines and expectations for the nature and extent of further evidence;
7. An exploration of section 82<sup>1</sup> of current legislation, with the view to a slightly higher maintenance grant for students that are estranged from parents to prevent homelessness over the summer months;
8. Paying the student existing loans monthly over a 12 month period;
9. Working with the SFE customer insights department to generate a survey for students in the system to further confirm findings.

<sup>1</sup><http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukxi/2011/1986/regulation/82/made>

Following our research, Stand Alone has generated points of action for consideration for the NUS and other stakeholders.

1. Work together to prevent estranged students from risks of homelessness over the summer months. For example, brokering agreements with universities to donate accommodation during the summer period, as well as putting greater financial support in place in the form of discretionary bursaries and grants only for students that are independent and estranged from parents.

## **Background**

In 2008 the NUS issued the report Evaluating Estrangement. This report focussed on the difficulties surrounding the assessment of estrangement when Local Authorities made decisions on whether a student was irreconcilably estranged from their family, with the view to providing the student with independent status and subsequently a full maintenance grant. This report was led by students that had been interviewed by the NUS LGBT campaigns network, but went on to suggest a wider application to the findings of the report. It stated that it was seeking answers to a problem that could be experienced by any student or potential student.

The aims of this report were as follows:

To produce an overview of the experiences of students who had applied for independent status on the grounds of estrangement; to determine the length of time it took students to prove estrangement or to exhaust the process; to consider the impact of this on students' progression into higher education; to look at what proof was required of students and from whom; to consider in particular the experiences of LGBT students in this context; and to establish the views of student advisers and local authorities on the process.

The guidance at that time indicated that if a student has not communicated with either parent for the period of a year, then that student should be regarded as irreconcilably estranged. And that this should be evidenced by a credible source – a doctor, councillor, teacher etc. However applicants did not necessarily need to have been estranged from their parents for a year to acquire independent status, if the awarding body is otherwise convinced that the estrangement is 'permanent and irreconcilable'.

However, the report concluded that the Local Authorities were struggling to interpret guidelines consistently and that one of the operatives would conceivably overturn the decision of another. The NUS made note that this put a considerable barrier to higher education for estranged students.

The report also highlighted emotionally damaging practices, such as asking students to provide letters from their parents as evidence, stating they no-longer wished to have contact with their child.

The philosophical conclusion reached from this report was linked to the idea that estranged students, at that time, were treated as guilty until proven innocent. An idea that was to be redressed by the SFE adopting Income Support Guidelines, and treating the testimony of the student as truth unless proven otherwise.

**The NUS made several key recommendations. Those that are relevant to this report are detailed below<sup>2</sup>**

1. That DIUS expands, updates and rewrites the guidance on estrangement to include case studies of both successful and unsuccessful applications and best practise in order to support staff in local authorities in the difficult task of assessing claims for independent status.
2. That DIUS funds the production of a step-by-step guide with information and advice for those who wish to apply for estrangement status. This should be produced in consultation with advisers and students, and distributed widely to schools, colleges, youth clubs, student money advisers and students' unions. The guide should explicitly state that students who are estranged on the grounds of sexual orientation and/or gender identity are able to access support. The guide should also include information about other sources of financial and emotional support available to applicants in this situation.
3. That awarding bodies provide applicants with information about student advisers in the area that could provide them with further support.
4. That notwithstanding the provision of improved and more detailed guidance, applicants should still be dealt with on a case-by-case basis, and therefore that the discretionary powers of awarding bodies should remain.
5. That awarding bodies do not ask for evidence from an applicant's parents, unless it is with the consent of that applicant.
6. That awarding bodies place as much value on 'informal evidence' as with statements from legal or other professional sources.
7. That certain identified staff in awarding bodies should deal with all estrangement applications to ensure consistency and to guarantee the privacy and dignity of the student in question.
8. That the relevant staff in awarding bodies should receive training in the issues involved with estrangement, with specific attention paid to issues connected to sexual orientation and gender identity. This should be funded by the awarding bodies and delivered in consultation with NUS and NASMA.

The report makes note that the SFE would take over the verification process in 2009/10. Thus many of the changes recommended did not reach Local Authority areas.

<sup>2</sup>[http://www.nus.org.uk/PageFiles/12238/Estrangement\\_report\\_web.pdf](http://www.nus.org.uk/PageFiles/12238/Estrangement_report_web.pdf)



The NUS followed up this report with a social policy briefing in 2012, which updated on the objectives set out in 2008 and the work of the NUS in conjunction with the SFE. This short report detailed the progress. See below:

### Improvements in England

The centralisation of the student funding service in England enabled NUS to use its research to push for better administration of estrangement applications, particularly in the period following the publication of the Hopkin Review. NUS were asked to chair the stakeholder committee looking at the service provided to vulnerable students and estrangement has been a principal focus of that group's work.

The numbers of estrangement applications are now monitored – hitherto it was impossible to say how many such applications were made or approved; a specific team within Student Finance England deals with estrangement applications to ensure they have the right training and to ensure broad consistency of approach; and information and standard letters for students applying for estrangement have been improved. Consequently, there has been a dramatic improvement in handling of these applications. In 2010/11, only 7 applications out of 2,000 had been approved by the start of the September of 2010. In 2011/12, 2,993 of 7,349 had been approved by a similar point in the year.

### What NUS is doing

NUS is extremely pleased that estranged student applications are now being monitored, and that the administration of these has greatly improved. Nevertheless there are still improvements to be made and we continue to look at these.

Currently, we are working with BIS and SFE to determine if greater discretion can be applied when estranged students reapply for support. The rules require that estrangement is proven for every year of support, which can be highly distressing for the student concerned, not to mention frustrating given that evidence had already been provided. We want to either extend the discretion as far as possible so SFE only asks for new or repeat evidence where it absolutely has to, or ultimately change the regulations themselves.

Furthermore, we will continue to seek improvements in information, advice and guidance, especially given that those who may qualify could be unaware of the very existence of estrangement status. We will also seek to work in the nations to help improve processes in those jurisdictions, using the English system as an example of good practice.<sup>3</sup>

## **Some key facts about family estrangement and adults aged 18-25 years old**

Family estrangement is a very difficult step to take for a young adult, and is most often an adaptive strategy to limit harm to mental and physical health.

The results of our forthcoming research indicate that childhood abuse and differences in morals, values and religious beliefs are the most common reasons for family estrangement.

Experts indicate there is a considerable stigma around family estrangement, due to the inbuilt prejudice towards forgiving and healing when it comes to family relationships. This can lead adults to feeling isolated and misunderstood, which can negatively impact upon well-being and mental health and increase likelihood of depression and anxiety disorders.

Family estrangement in young adults comes with more amplified feelings of shame, insecurity and guilt.

When young people become estranged, their mental health symptoms often initially improve. However, lack of support and intervention and the onset of frustration can lead to dependency on drugs and alcohol, depression or anxiety disorders.

Feelings of isolation in childhood/young adulthood may impact a person's ability to develop social skills and independently develop wider support networks to draw on.

Adults who are estranged after suffering abuse can often carry with them a sense of inadequacy that can negatively impact upon their academic achievements, job performance and relationships (National Council on Child Abuse and Family Violence, 2007).

For young adults affected by LGBT issues, parental rejection and estrangement initiated by the parent is likely to impact on self-esteem, feelings of self-worth and self-acceptance.

## **Our research**

Students have contacted Stand Alone since the charity came into existence. We have received numerous e-mails, identifying key frustrations with the system of evidencing (and re-evidencing) family estrangement for Student Finance England. The need to provide evidence of family estrangement is accepted within this exploration, and Stand Alone understands that supporting documentation is necessary to protect public funds.

### **Phases of research:**

1. We looked at key areas of action as suggested by e-mails and telephone calls asking for our support. By looking at trends in these e-mails we identified areas for discussion with Student Finance and the NUS.

2. Stand Alone set up two focus groups of ten students: ten currently in the SFE system (in varying stages) and ten that have already graduated and had received a grant as estranged 'independent' student. We broadly discussed their experiences in a controlled setting, what they thought was successful about applying for support as an estranged student and what was not successful. For each stage of application we asked participants in groups to find key words that summarised their experience. We then asked each student to fill in a short survey to rate their experiences, and give any further feedback they may have been unhappy sharing in a group context.

3. We consulted with our clinical board on the psychological profile of an estranged student, and asked them to outline the key vulnerabilities of two case studies before, during and after the process of application. This was in addition to asking each to comment on our key findings from our focus groups.

The clinical board: Mark Sichel (L.C.S.W.), Jade Weston (PhD), Dr Joshua Coleman, Nick McCubbin, (BA, PGDipPsych, AdvPDip, MBACP, MBPsS) Mike Betts (PGDipPsych, Msc, MBACP, MBPsS) and Nicolette Allan (BA,MA).

## **Looking ahead**

Stand Alone can clearly see that the SFE has shown a commitment to improving practices and working with stakeholders to improve student experiences.

However, to build on these improvements, Stand Alone has researched and outlined a pathway for further innovation and progress with estranged applications in future years.

Stand Alone has chosen to research and evaluate the SFE's practices in terms of **minimising risk of negative consequences to mental health and wellbeing**, and has made suggestions for improvement on these three terms:

### **Burden**

The burden of searching for evidence of family estrangement in an unsupported fashion can be emotionally taxing and does not minimise the risk of vulnerability to the student. Regulations that require the vulnerable student to further prove their estrangement each academic year do nothing further to minimise risk of potential harm to the student in this sense.

### **Inconsistency**

The inconsistencies in decisions from differing SFE processing personnel do not minimise the risk of harm to the student. Consistent advice from Student Finance is difficult to attain and the lack of single operative to deal with cases further minimizes the risk to the student.

### **Accountability**

The lack of provision over the summer months does not minimise the risk of harm to the student during these periods and periods where they are in attendance. Furthermore, the amount of maintenance grant as it stands does not maximise the potential for academic progress.

## **Burden**

The overall burden of re-visiting a dysfunctional past to search for evidence of family estrangement puts the student at risk, particularly if under pressure and unsupported. Our beneficiaries have told us that the process is often upsetting and emotionally taxing and constant reminder of their difficult circumstances. Regulations that require students to re-prove their estrangement each academic year do nothing further to decrease risk of harm to the student. This practice can amplify anxiety and depression through putting students in a position of uncertainty. It can encourage a student to stay connected to a situation that they might otherwise walk away from, or lead to the student dropping out of courses of study as the task of proving and re-proving their circumstances is too difficult.

### **The clinical board stated:**

‘Exposing an individual to a process of proving estrangement in this manner could lead to them feeling unsupported, vulnerable and pose risk to mental health and wellbeing. Re-visiting the past in and of itself is not necessarily detrimental to one’s mental health, but this process seems unsafe without anyone to provide psychological support through the process. Re-visiting the past without support can increase feelings of isolation and helplessness, leading to further risk of emotional difficulties.’

### **Jessica stated:**

‘I understand the need for evidence in these kinds of situations but it feels like I am always proving that I don’t have a family. It triggers everything, and I don’t feel like I can move on. I was already going through a difficult time in dealing with my situation, but this process makes it all so much more profound.’

Current guidelines take for granted that third parties work flawlessly – that professionals such as teachers, doctors and social workers stay in post for long periods of time and hand over accurate and detailed records of their work. Agency culture is rife: teachers, doctors and social workers often move on from posts quickly and can be difficult to trace years later. Our board of student beneficiaries tell us that finding the right people to write letters is difficult, frustrating, expensive and time consuming.

### Emma stated:

'Unfortunately as a student I am required to apply for student finance every year... the second year and third year it became harder and harder. I had to contact the hostel that I stayed in, and the whole staffing has now changed. So it was so difficult for me to get an up-to-date letter and the whole process took ages and ages...'

This puts the student at risk of suspending study not just once at the beginning of the process, but numerous times. Stand Alone would raise the point that this could potentially have negative impacts on the rates of retention for estranged students in Higher Education.

Furthermore, many abuse victims haven't reached out for help during the time of the abuse or neglect. Thus, a professional outside of the family will not always be aware of circumstances or the subsequent estrangement, which can lead to further difficulties in evidencing.

Although it accepted that evidence of family estrangement is a necessary, Stand Alone would go as far as to suggest that the notion of repeatedly searching for valid evidence of family estrangement each academic year is a form of gaslighting. In a domestic context, this is a process whereby the perpetrator of an abuse leads the survivor into believing they are lying, exaggerating or imagining the abuse. This kind of strategy from the abuser can leave survivors doubting their own perceptions, memory or sanity.<sup>4</sup>

Student Finance England's processes serve as institutional gaslighting, by requiring the student to regularly 'prove' their circumstances/version of events without any kind of specialised, consistent or reliable support system to help them do this. The rigidity of this system has led many of our beneficiaries into doubting and questioning their own thought processes.

### Willow stated:

'My battle with student finance and NHS bursaries (as my course is funded by the NHS) has been frustrating and demoralising and I have often been made to doubt my own circumstances at times'

<sup>4</sup>(Forward, 2003; Engel 2002; Stern 2007)

Jessica stated:

'I felt so much pressure to either drop out or just go back and get on with them, as it would have made everything so much easier.'

The clinical board stated:

'Requests to prove estrangement (each year) could lead to feelings of being unheard or even mistrusted, which is likely to lead to or exacerbate existing mental health difficulties, due to the uncertainties regarding whether students will be able to continue their studies. Stress, anxiety and preoccupation of this kind lead to problems in concentration, which are likely to have a negative effect academically.'

It seems incongruous that students must prove that they are 'irreconcilably' estranged each year and when proved properly once, this should be enough. The system needs to become much more supportive. This is not only in tone, as suggested by the NUS in 2008, but in the way the system is structured for those that interact with it. Suggestions of this kind will be explored in more depth in 'points of action'.

The clinical board stated:

"When an individual makes the brave decision to open up about their abusive or dysfunctional experience, it is essential that their experience is understood in this context. Any process in which estrangement must be proved, should take into consideration this phenomena."

When asked to summarise his application experience, Anthony said:

'The people at Student Finance really don't understand it at all. The uncertainty that they put you through is terrifying for someone like me, that already has needs.'

## Inconsistency

As the student must present evidence of family estrangement for each academic year and a different operative may deal with the evidence and interpret its suitability differently. Telephone assistants have little/no access to case notes and thus advise from what is perceived to be a script, adding further confusion for the student.

### The clinical board said:

'It's vital that students trust operatives within this process. Worrying about providing evidence, uncertainty of the processes and their outcomes are likely to have negative effects on well-being and academic achievements.'

'For an individual to be asked to produce evidence to prove estrangement for each academic year does not provide an appropriate structure or have the appropriate sensitivity, considering the nature of the subject matter.'

Our beneficiaries have stated that re-submission is immensely frustrating: forms of evidence that were accepted one year are questioned again by a different operative. Furthermore, advice they receive on the (premium rate) Student Support telephone helplines do not align with further requests for evidence that are issued by operatives. It makes financial sense to outsource call centres, however not if operatives are not informed of case notes, processes or are not trained in handling calls from vulnerable students. This is immensely frustrating and puts the user at risk.

### Laura said:

'One year a letter from my teacher was enough, the next year they wanted another letter from another person to prove they had known about my circumstances. I never spoke to the same person (at Student Finance) twice... All it resulted in was huge delays. I didn't get my grant when I needed it.'

### Y said:

'I received no useful advice from student finance whatsoever. On many occasions I was given outright wrong advice which often wasted my time. For example, ordering 3 years worth of bank statements as a student finance operative had advised me to do. I would dread every interaction I had to have with them. Being able to speak to an actual assessor would have been much better.'

### Anthony said:

'It's like they are reading from a script with no knowledge of what you have already been told or what you have submitted already.'



## **Accountability**

Students that are estranged from their parents do not have support over the summer months, which lead to a very real risk of homelessness over this period. As such, they do not have a home to go to as other students might and there's no extra provision or local authority care for estranged students as there would be for care leavers in certain circumstances.

Our focus groups of beneficiaries repeatedly raised the concern that they had to work full time during term, often in two jobs, to earn enough money to pay upfront for accommodation over the long summer break.

All of our focus group participants felt this damaged their academic progress and put them under considerable mental strain in comparison to other students.

Furthermore, young adults in this position find it difficult to reach out to others and are often mistrusting. This has an impact on their abilities to ask friends and others for accommodation and/or explain their situation. Many said that they found it difficult to find accommodation that started in the summer months, and would not be able to afford to pay for the entire house over these months if so.

### **The clinical board said:**

'The stress of potentially being homeless is likely to have a detrimental impact. Sofa surfing is a form of homelessness which although 'hidden' is known to have a negative impact on physical and mental health. These processes are likely to have a detrimental impact on the individual's academic achievements (if working). Not only will they have less time to concentrate on their studies at a crucial time (during the exam period) but stress, anxiety and depression are known to negatively impact academic performance through impacting on concentration, sleep, memory processes.'

'Any additional support that could be offered to estranged students in the summer months could not only support and empower the individual to complete their studies in a more healthy manner, but would also highlight to them they are deserving of a level of support that they may never have experienced and could very much need.'

### **Victoria said:**

'I found myself living in a squat over the summer, and it was a matter of existence and survival. In many senses I was nomadic. The pressure of working so many jobs to afford those months in other academic years was immense and very frustrating.'

Jessica said:

‘The process of not having a home over summer felt very humiliating and I didn’t want people to see me in the way they had to. I had no choice really as I didn’t have money and so I didn’t have options. The re-submission of my evidence didn’t help me in this stage at all, everything felt uncertain.’

This issue is likely to become much more amplified with the onset of new regulations that indicate a scaling down of access to learning funds and discretionary loans.

## **Points of Action**

1.If estranged students are to be asked to provide evidence of their estrangement to Student Finance England, the organisation should be aware of and take responsibility for the risks to the student's mental wellbeing that this process may pose. Stand Alone would suggest Student Finance England work with the charity and its partners to build more consistent, structured and reliable support for students during this process.

2.It is suggested that a dedicated Freephone helpline to support students whilst they search for evidence should be put in place; this helpline would offer thorough and consistent guidance on evidencing for estranged students and other relevant independent students as well as pastoral support. This should be manned by operatives that have a full understanding of the nuances of the processes of submitting evidence, and the delicate nature of familial dysfunction.

3.This would complement structured third party intervention for those students that feel the process of gathering evidence of their family estrangement would pose too large a risk to their mental/physical wellbeing and/or would be unlikely to find suitable evidence without a legal declaration. Students would receive an individual case worker and contact during the assessment stage of attaining estranged student status (ESS).

4.In view of this, better guidance and advice available online is recommended in the form of a dedicated microsite, as well as examples of evidence that have been accepted in previous cases where the situation was 'complicated'.

5.Stand Alone would re-iterate the NUS's 2012 suggestion in pursuing changes to regulations for the re-submission of evidence for each academic year.

6.Stand Alone suggests further research is needed to conclude on the relationship between the re-submission of evidence and retention rates of students estranged from their family.

7.If repeat evidence continues to be required, it is suggested that the guidelines and expectations for the nature and extent of further evidence should be clearly strategised and more adequately set out for the student at the beginning of the process of application.

8. An exploration of section 82 of current legislation, with the view to potential flexibility for students that are estranged from parents. This would mean a slightly higher maintenance grant for students that are estranged from parents to prevent homelessness over the summer months in the first and second years of study only.

9. Paying existing loans monthly over a 12 month period would help students manage their money more effectively, and would reduce the risk of homelessness during the summer months.

10. Stand Alone would strongly suggest a collaborative approach from the charity, universities and NUS to work together to prevent estranged students from risks of homelessness over summer. For example, brokering agreements with universities to donate accommodation during the summer period, as well as putting greater financial support in place in the form of discretionary bursaries and grants only for estranged students.

11. To work with the SFE customer insights department and generate a survey for all students that applied for independent status on the grounds of being estranged from parents.

## **Stand Alone Helpline, Microsite and Estranged Student Status (ESS)**

In light of the findings of this report and points of action 1 and 2, Stand Alone would like to propose a collaborative model of action, working with Student Finance England. This would involve the following:

1. A dedicated Stand Alone helpline, open 9am-6pm weekdays would provide emotional support and advice for those students searching for evidence of family estrangement, as well as a point of reference to provide clearer and more consistent guidance on the processes and expectations and if possible, cases.

The SFE can take advantage of the expertise of our volunteer base at Stand Alone to help to safeguard against any risk to students that the process may pose and provide an understanding and supportive attitude.

2. A dedicated website/microsite that details processes for applying for independent statuses where young adults have cut contact with their parents. This would also guidance for students around searching for evidence of family estrangement, past case studies and information about how to access support once on campus and studying.

3. In order to minimise risk to student's mental wellbeing, the option of third party intervention should be available to those students who feel exploring their past and searching for evidence may prove too traumatic and/or a risk to their mental wellbeing.

Students would apply to Stand Alone for 'ESS' and give up to five references on a simple form that details their relationship to the reference in as much detail as possible.

One operative at the charity would undertake the necessary referencing to find the 'proof' of the family estrangement in adherence to the current guidelines from Student Finance England.

This operative would become the student's case worker and would be available to contact for updates on the case and expected dates for clearance. Each case worker would deal with around 120 cases per year and dedicate 15 hours of working time to each case.

Operatives would be trained professionals in the areas of family counselling, mediation and social work. Thus they would be able to make an informed decision on the case, as well as providing the correct pastoral approach for vulnerable people.

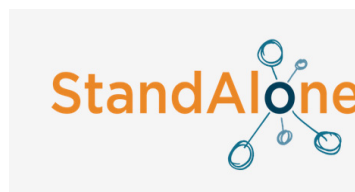
Should the student struggle to have evidence of their estrangement, the organisation can, in last resort circumstances, arrange a form of legal emancipation of the young adult from the parent in this circumstance through a family mediation lawyer. This would involve both parties signing and agreeing the estrangement.

Stand Alone would then either clear the student or reject the student and feedback this information to Student Finance at three points during the year.

A certificate or letter would be issued to the student, which could be used for other organisations such as NHS bursaries, teacher training organisations and eventually university halls.

## **Appendix I**

### **About Stand Alone**



Stand Alone: A charity to support adults that are estranged from their family or a key family member.

In 2008, a charity that exclusively supported estranged adults didn't exist. Although other organisations and charities have been in the position to offer related advice, our beneficiaries have told us that before they found Stand Alone, they didn't know of a place to turn to talk about this issue.

Many anonymous forums remain online, but before Stand Alone was formed there was no provision to break down the isolation associated with family estrangement and provide tangible support with processes such as applications to Student Finance. Previous to Stand Alone, GP's and health care agencies had few avenues for referral save one-to-one psychotherapy and general counselling services.

Furthermore, societal awareness and understanding of family estrangement was low and substantial research on family estrangement has not been carried out either in the UK, North America or Australasia. Thus, insights into family estrangement to date have most often drawn on empirical methods to explore themes and trends that emerge from psychotherapeutic practice.

### **Key facts about Stand Alone**

Stand Alone started to be developed in August 2012 and became a charity in England and Wales in 2013. Registered charity number - 1154710.

We are constituted to promote social inclusion for the public benefit by preventing people who are estranged from their family or members of their family from becoming socially excluded, relieving the needs of those people, and advancing education among the public on the subject of family estrangement.

We are currently supported by The National Lottery to provide meet-up groups for adults that are estranged from their family in the South East. This is a programme that is expanding nationally with the help of volunteer organisers in other parts of the country. We would like this also to expand to universities nationwide.

We informally partner with larger organisations such as Crossroads, NAPAC and the Foyer Federation to initiate models of best practice, and to reach more beneficiaries.

Developing services for students with proving their family estrangement is a key part of our strategic plan for the next five years, and was a key point of action in our application to the Charities Commission of England and Wales.

### **Our Trustees**

Athar Abidi - Social Media and Community Manager at Age UK  
(Chair)

Tara McInerney - Teacher (Treasurer)

Reetu Sood: Capacity and development consultant for third sector organisations

Hekate Papadaki: Grants and Development Manager at Rosa, the UK Fund for Women and Girls

(We are expanding our board in the coming months)

### **Our Clinical Board**

Mark Sichel (L.C.S.W.) Psychotherapist working with family estrangement, author.

Dr Jade Weston (pHD), Clinical Psychologist working specialising in young people, adoption, children in care and care leavers.

Dr Joshua Coleman, Psychologist specialising in family estrangement.

Nick McCubbin (BA, PGDipPsych, AdvPDip, MBACP, MBPsS) and Mike Betts (PGDipPsych, Msc, MBACP, MBPsS) Psychotherapists that form the organisation BetterMind, both Mike and Nick have previously worked as consultant psychotherapists with Foyer Federation and other third sector organisations.

Nicolette Allan (BA,MA). Psychologist and Stand Alone group leader.

### **Our Student Trustees**

Jessica Bird - University of Sheffield

Willow Howard - University of Manchester

Lorna Ashman - University of Kent at Canterbury

Antony Cunningham - University of Southampton

### **Our projects board**

Judy Harris - Head of Operations at The British Lung Foundation

Jon Bird - Head of Operations at NAPAC

Athar Abidi - Chair of trustees and Social Media and Community Manager at Age UK, ex digital manager.

Sarah Engerer - HR consultant within the third sector.

Dave Flindall - Web and systems developer

### **Funding Partners**

The National Lottery

The Tudor Trust (2nd Stage)



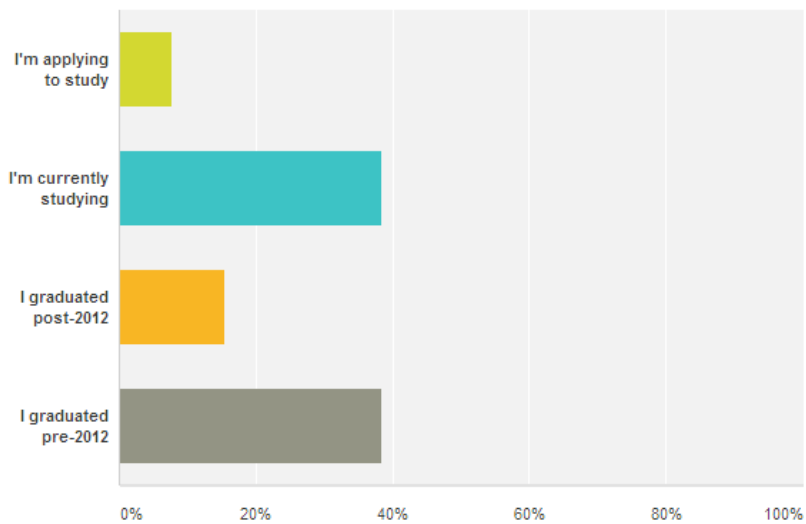




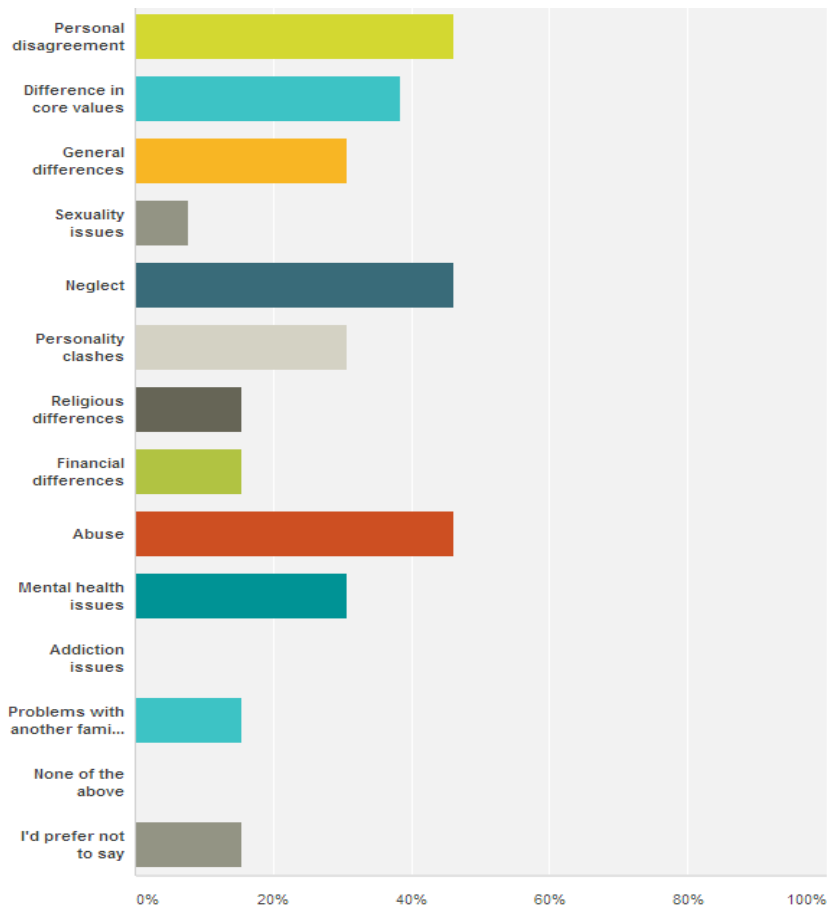
## Appendix III

Sixteen of our twenty participants chose to fill in our survey after the initial focus group. The results are as follows:

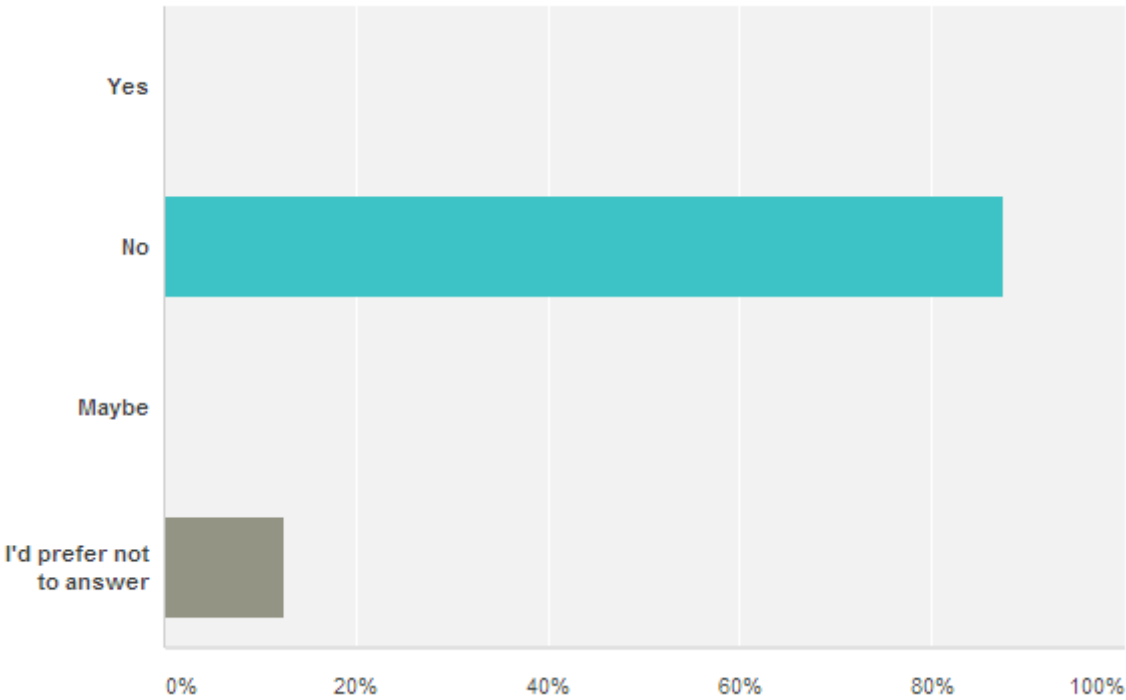
When did you graduate or are you studying or applying to study?



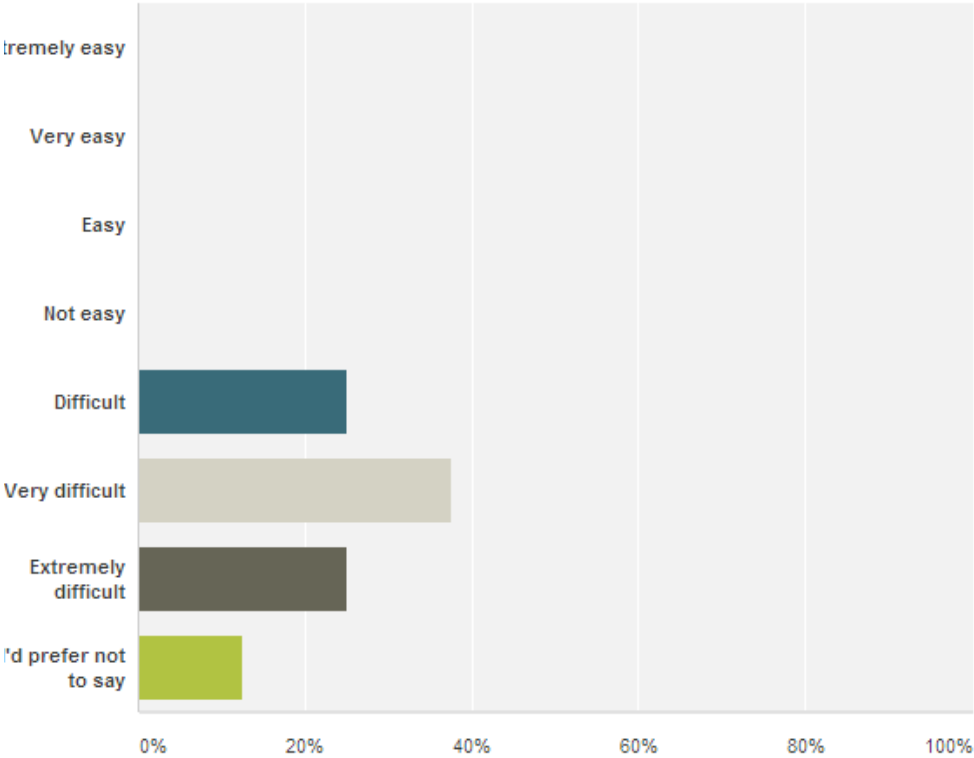
What best describes the reasons for your estrangement?



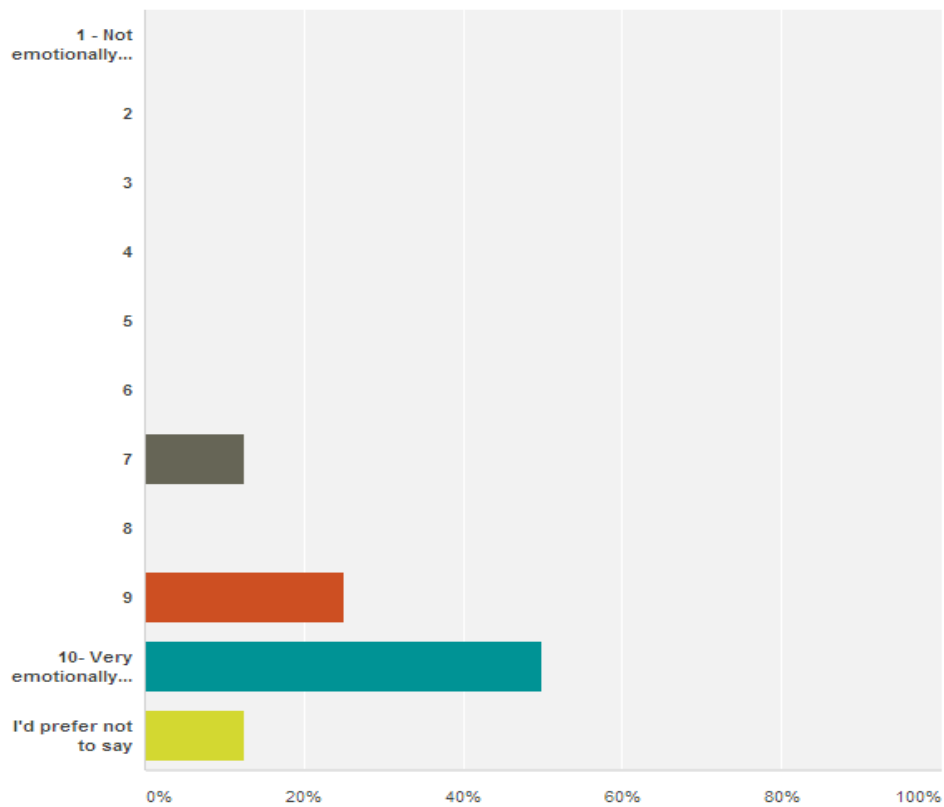
Did you feel you recieved consistent advice from Student Finance England whilst applying?



How would you describe the process of finding the evidence you submitted or tried to submit?



Using the scale below, how emotionally taxing was the process of attaining evidence of your family estrangement?



Looking back, how stressful would you say the process of applying for student support has been?

