

Report to: Corporate Parenting Panel

Date of meeting: 16 October 2025

By: Director of Children's Services

Title: Separated Migrant Children Report

Purpose: To provide an overview of the East Sussex County Council's (ESCC) work with Separated Migrant Children (also known as Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children)

RECOMMENDATION:

The Corporate Parenting Panel is recommended to note the report.

1. Background Information

1.1 Separated Migrant children are unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (UASC) under the age of 18 who arrive in the United Kingdom without a parent or legal guardian and seek asylum in their own right. As of March 2024, there were approximately 7,380 UASC being looked after by local authorities in England, representing around 9% of all looked-after children. The majority are aged 16–17, and their numbers have generally increased in recent years, driven by global instability and rising migration flows.

1.2 Legally, separated migrant children fall under both Immigration and Child Welfare legislation. Under UK immigration rules (paragraph 352ZD) and the Borders, Citizenship and Immigration Act 2009 (Section 55), the Home Office has a duty to safeguard and promote the welfare of all children in its care. Concurrently, local authorities have statutory duties under the Children Act 1989 to assess, support, and accommodate separated migrant children as children in need when they become looked-after children. Where the age of an asylum seeker is in dispute, local authorities are responsible for conducting formal, 'Merton-compliant' age assessments.

1.3 The Home Office is primarily responsible for processing asylum claims and managing initial safeguarding and placement through the National Transfer Scheme (NTS), which mandates the redistribution of UASC across local authorities to ensure an equitable share of responsibility. Local authorities are then responsible for delivering ongoing support, including suitable accommodation, education, health services, and protection from harm or exploitation.

2. Supporting Information

2.1 East Sussex County Council developed a specialist Separated Migrant Children's Team in 2017/18, the team operates as part of the wider Through Care Service. Children's Services have adopted the terminology of *Separated Migrant Children* in place of the more traditional term *Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children (UASC)*. This change aligns with the national 'Language that Cares' agenda, which encourages the use of respectful, person-centred language and a reduction in the use of acronyms. It is noted, however, that the term UASC remains in use in some statutory literature and across other local authorities.

2.2 The team currently consists of 5 full-time social workers, 7 personal advisors, 2 case workers, and one education lead. Within the broader Through Care Service, a participation lead

and specialist mental health nurse also contribute to the holistic support of the children and young people. Leadership and oversight are provided by 2 part-time practice managers, reporting to the Operational Manager for Through care Services. This staffing structure enables the delivery of comprehensive and specialist services to a highly vulnerable group of children and young people.

2.3 The majority of referrals into the service come via the National Transfer Scheme (NTS), which was established to support Kent County Council in distributing responsibility for separated migrant children across the UK. The team continues to receive regular referral requests through the scheme, ensuring that local quotas are met while maintaining capacity for high-quality care and support. Since the beginning of the year, there have been 4 spontaneous arrivals, including young people who presented directly to police, were found by Border Force, or arrived on school trips and subsequently made asylum claims. As at the time of writing, the team was working with 76 children under 18, with 3 new arrivals expected week commencing 29 September 2025. In addition, 141 care leavers remain open to the team, and a further 9 young people aged over 21 are receiving continued support due to ongoing vulnerability or complex needs. Currently separated migrant children represent 11% of our total looked after children and 33% of our care leaver cohort.

2.4 Children under the age of 16 are typically placed with foster carers, while those aged 16 to 18 are accommodated in supported housing according to their assessed needs. Most placements are within East Sussex, facilitating effective oversight and support. However, a number of young people are placed out of county due to safeguarding considerations, family connections, or cultural and religious needs better met by placements elsewhere. The service supports young people from approximately 14 different countries. The majority originate from Sudan, South Sudan, Afghanistan, Syria, Vietnam, Iran, and Iraq. There has been a notable reduction in Afghan arrivals and a slight increase in young people from Eritrea. The largest groups continue to come from Sudan, and Kurdish regions of Iran, Iraq, and Syria. New arrivals remain predominantly male and aged 16–17, but there has been a recent increase in female arrivals, particularly from Somalia. This culturally diverse cohort brings varying needs and experiences that inform the service's support strategies.

2.5 In terms of age verification, the team has completed 2 full age assessments and 4 brief enquiries this year. While the National Age Assessment Board (NAAB) continues to be used, significant delays have necessitated a return to in-house assessments in some cases. The closure of local asylum hotels in summer 2023 led to a temporary reduction in age assessments; however, there has been a recent resurgence in age-disputed cases during summer 2025, impacting team capacity.

2.6 Young people's asylum claims are processed by the Home Office. A caseworker is appointed and conducts an initial interview with each child/young person, interpreters are organised by the Home Office and a legal representative can also attend. If young people are granted asylum, this will generally mean that they will receive 5 years 'Leave to Remain'. After 5 years, they can apply to settle in the UK. If they are not granted asylum they will be asked to leave the UK (voluntarily, with support, or forcibly). Young people have the right to appeal this decision. The young people in this group often require intensive support, particularly those with complex needs, and Social Workers and Personal Advisors continue to provide assistance with education, skill-building, and preparation for independence. If young people are not granted asylum the team have to complete human rights assessments to identify whether the young person is still eligible for support or not.

2.7 Following the partial repeal of the Illegal Migration Act in summer 2024, the Home Office resumed processing previously paused asylum claims. This led to a number of young people in the service finally receiving initial decisions on their asylum applications. In August 2025, the Home Office resumed substantive processing of Syrian asylum claims, and the Syrian cohort in the service is now being invited for interviews. Since January 2025, there have been significant delays in asylum decision-making following interviews. More than one-third of those interviewed this year are still awaiting an outcome. Of those who have received decisions, outcomes are evenly split between grants and refusals, with the latter group progressing to appeals. The appeal process itself is facing delays, with wait times currently ranging from one to 3 years. Of the appeals heard so far, approximately half have been successful, while the remainder have been refused, contributing to

the growing number of young people facing 'All Rights Exhausted' status and requiring Human Rights Assessments to determine ongoing support.

2.8 The service has a statutory obligation to provide accommodation and subsistence to care leavers under the age of 21 who are appealing negative asylum decisions. This group has reached its highest level since the team's formation, currently comprising 27 young people, 20% of the care leaver cohort. Those turning 18 during their appeal process do not have access to usual 'move on' housing routes, placing additional strain on the service to fund and source suitable accommodation. Compounding this, Home Office funding for each young person reduces by 70% once they turn 18, meaning the cost of local placements is often not covered. Refugee care leavers over 18 increasingly turn to private house-share rentals due to a lack of supported options. The Local Offer rent and deposit scheme has seen a significant increase in uptake as a result. Five Human Rights Assessments have been completed in 2025 for young people who have become 'All Rights Exhausted' following the conclusion of their asylum appeals.

2.9 The service operates *Welcome to the UK* sessions which continue to be well received and effective in supporting newly arrived young people. A third follow-up session has recently been piloted, focusing on additional topics such as substance misuse and healthy relationships. These sessions have been highlighted by the Refugee Council as a model of best practice for other local authorities to follow. The service also runs weekly lunch groups for care leavers not in education or training, on Tuesdays in Hastings and Thursdays in Eastbourne. These groups combine English language support, careers advice, mental health input, and include peer-led cooking activities to build independence skills and promote social connection.

2.10 Work continues to broaden education access, including a new partnership with a local college to deliver a summer programme tailored to young people who are not in mainstream education or who arrived late in the academic year. Health partnerships have also developed, including access to blood screening during Initial Health Assessments (IHAs), which enables timely intervention in cases of blood-borne diseases. The team continues to monitor and respond to emerging health risks, such as misuse of prescription medications like Pregabalin. Young people continue to access *My View*, a therapeutic service from the Refugee Council. Feedback remains positive, with many reporting a beneficial impact on their mental health and emotional wellbeing. In addition, a health and wellbeing fund is available to young people to help them access hobbies, sports memberships, or equipment, and contributes to broader wellbeing and community integration. Religious and cultural celebrations are also actively supported, with events such as Eid and Christmas parties organised for young people, and assistance provided to access places of worship where needed.

2.11 The national discourse surrounding migration has had a noticeable impact on the wellbeing of some young people in East Sussex. A number have reported experiencing discrimination, including verbal abuse and physical assaults, these have been reported to Police. Despite these challenges, there are also encouraging examples of community and public support. The service continues to monitor areas of community tension and is working in partnership with the police and safer communities teams to strengthen local support strategies.

2.12 The service works closely with local migrant support services for adults to ensure a consistent and joined-up approach to community support, especially for care leavers. The team has continued to support unaccompanied minors from Ukraine and facilitated access to a wide range of social and recreational activities. These have included cycling, rock climbing, and football sessions with Brighton & Hove Albion, alongside a third successful residential visit to Jamie's Farm in spring 2025.

3. Conclusion and reasons for recommendation

3.1 The Corporate Parenting Panel is recommended to note the contents of the report.

CAROLYN FAIR

Director of Children's Services

Contact Officer: Sally Carnie

Tel. No. 07876 037264

Email: sally.carnie@eastsussex.gov.uk

LOCAL MEMBERS

All

BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS

None