Scrutiny Review Board

Support for Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children

Report by the Review Board

Councillor Kathryn Field (Chair)
Councillor Francis Whetstone
Councillor Trevor Webb

People Scrutiny Committee – 19 September 2019
Cabinet – 12 November 2019
Full Council – 3 December 2019

The report of the Scrutiny Review of Support for Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children (UASC)

Contents

Recommendations 3

Objectives and Scope of the Review 4

Background 5

Definitions and responsibilities 5

How do UASC arrive in the UK? 6

Why do UASC come to the United Kingdom? 6

The situation in East Sussex 7

Findings and Recommendations 8

Mentoring Support 8

Access to social activities and other opportunities that promote wellbeing 9

Capacity and diversity of accommodation 10

Work experience 11

English as an Additional Language support 12

Member engagement and support for UASC 14

Conclusions 15

Appendix: Terms of reference, membership and evidence 16

Scope and terms of reference 16

Board Membership and project support 16

Witnesses providing evidence 16

Review Board meeting dates 17

Evidence papers 17

Recommendations

Recommendation		Page
1	The Children's Services Department to explore the potential for linking local UASC with the Hastings and Rother Buddy Project (HBRP) and, subject to the outcome of its work with the HRBP, to assess the feasibility of developing similar provision elsewhere within East Sussex in partnership with the voluntary sector.	9
2	The Children's Services Department to assess the feasibility of developing in East Sussex a social space for UASC where they can meet with their peers and build their confidence, support networks and social skills.	10
3	With a view to increasing both the amount and diversity of accommodation provision, the Children's Services Department to explore further the options for raising awareness amongst local communities of the specific accommodation needs of UASC. This to include: • reviewing its advertising campaigns to include an element which highlights the specific needs of UASC. • assisting Members to foster connections with different sections of their local communities. • more cultural awareness training for existing foster carers and supported accommodation providers which seeks to address this need.	11
4	The Children's Services Department to explore the options for increasing access to work experience opportunities for UASC. This to include: • assessing the potential for the Department to raise awareness of the work experience needs of UASC with schools and colleges and to review the current levels of work experience placements for UASC. • Members to support this process by using their local leadership position to help raise awareness of the work experience needs of UASC and to help foster more work experience placements with public sector organisations and the voluntary sector.	12
5	The Children's Services Department to explore how an increased early focus on English as an additional language could be provided to UASC. This to include a review of: • the Department's guidance to UASC and officers on this area; and • the potential feasibility of providing intensive language courses which could include commissioning accommodation providers to deliver intensive support packages within the first 4-6 weeks of arrival.	13
6	To help expand the range of support available in East Sussex, the Children's Services Department to develop a UASC toolkit for Members The toolkit to provide guidance on: • the key challenges facing UASC – such as accommodation needs, opportunities for social activities, access to work experience and English language support; • what assistance is currently available for UASC; • how Members can develop links with key organisations and communities. • the process for referring potential leads to the Department.	14

Objectives and Scope of the Review

1. Supporting unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (UASC) is a challenging area of responsibility for the Children's Services Department. The children and young people in this group are designated Looked After Children (LAC). They therefore have the same range of support needs as British-born children and the Council has the same range of obligations.

2. However, UASC also have an additional range of needs which makes supporting them an even more complex and challenging process. These challenges include often having little or no spoken English and needing specialist therapy (as they may have suffered trauma in their country of origin and/or during their journey to the United Kingdom). Very often UASC will also arrive with little background information.

3. In seeking to meet the specific needs of these children and young people, the department must also deal with a range of significant operational and financial challenges. For example, ensuring the council has sufficient capacity to cope with UASC arrivals is difficult as, by their very nature, such incidents can be highly unpredictable. Whilst some arrivals are known about in advance, (see the National Transfer Scheme in para 17), many are 'out of the blue' discoveries. A particular concern for the department in this respect is the impact of a discovery of a large group of UASC. Such spontaneous arrivals (as they usually referred to) have occurred in East Sussex. For example, in November 2018 11 Vietnamese UASC were discovered in a lorry at the port of Newhaven. Finding appropriate and immediate support for such a significant number of vulnerable young people at short notice was a major challenge for the Department.

4. Setting aside the operational challenges, spontaneous arrivals also create additional financial pressures for the department. This is because of a funding gap between the grant allocation from Government per young person and the actual cost that is required to support each UASC. Consequently, a sudden increase in UASC numbers could have significant financial implications for the authority and its ability to support these vulnerable children and young people.

5. Another area of challenge for the department is the current insufficient level of experienced providers of supported housing, supported lodgings and foster placements for UASC within the Council's provision. As a result, the council currently places a significant number of UASC in either 'out of county' provision or in other expensive in-county provision.

6. All these factors make assessing the needs of these children and young people and providing them with appropriate support especially challenging.

7. In the light of these and other challenges the People Scrutiny Committee agreed on 27 November 2018 to undertake a scrutiny review of support for UASC. The goal of the review would be to investigate the potential for developing realistic, practical recommendations that would assist with supporting UASC.

8. Following some initial scoping work, the Committee agreed to explore the following lines of enquiry:

- **What scope is there for developing strategies that would help both increase and diversify the capacity and range of providers of accommodation for UASC in East Sussex?** Such an increase in capacity would have the benefit of leaving the department better placed to deal with a spontaneous arrival incident involving significant numbers of UASC. It would also increase the likelihood that UASC could be placed in accommodation which has a better fit to the individual's cultural background and help reduce the number of out of county placements. In looking at this area, the Committee were aware of the financial pressures on the service. However, given the fact that the overall financial package of support available to support UASC is driven by policy at the national level, the Committee agreed with the Scoping Board's suggestion that it would be more effective for the review to focus on capacity issues (as this in turn could help mitigate some of the financial pressures).
- **What could be done to help deliver improved opportunities for social activities and mentoring support?** Improvements in these areas could help address some of the mental health and other emotional and wellbeing needs of UASC. Other important areas of support which the Board agreed to explore included the potential to further develop practical opportunities, such as work experience options and support with learning English.

- **The role of the local Member** was also considered. Members have a well-developed knowledge of their local communities and have a network of contacts which include local businesses, organisations and community groups. There is potential therefore for Members to help with raising awareness and support for UASC in their local communities.

9. The Board also received evidence relating to the legal restrictions placed on asylum-seekers regarding paid employment whilst their asylum claim is processed. The Board heard that these paid employment restrictions are often viewed negatively by UASC. The Board were also aware of a wider concern about the length of time it can take to process asylum claims and that there is a 'lift the ban' campaign. However, the Board recognise that this is ultimately an issue that affects the whole of the country and is not something the Council can directly influence and is also not part of the agreed lines of enquiry for the review. The Board therefore agreed to focus its attention on more local issues.

10. This report firstly provides an overview of the national and local context within which support for UASC is provided in East Sussex. It then outlines the findings and recommendations of the Review Board.

Background

Definitions and responsibilities

11. Asylum-seekers are people who have fled their home country and are seeking refuge in another country. They are referred to as asylum-seekers whilst their application is being determined. Children who are seeking asylum and who arrived without a family member or other responsible adult are usually referred to as Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children (UASC).

12. The Home Office defines an unaccompanied asylum-seeking child as a person who, at the time of making the asylum application:

- is, or (if there is no documentary evidence) appears to be, under eighteen;
- is applying for asylum in his or her own right;
- has no adult relative or guardian to turn to in this country; and
- is fleeing persecution from their own country.

13. At the national government level, the Home Office is responsible for processing and making decisions on asylum applications. In terms of process, whilst an asylum claim is ongoing, UASC are given the status of "UASC Leave". With this immigration status the young person can participate in education but is not allowed to work. The Home Office decision about a young person's claim can result in an offer of either "Refugee Status" (for 5 years or until 17.5 years age) or Discretionary Leave until age 18. At 18 the young person must make a fresh claim to remain in the UK indefinitely (indefinite leave to remain).

14. At the level of local government, local authorities are responsible for the care of this vulnerable group. Section 17 of the Children Act (1989) imposes a general duty on local authorities to safeguard and promote the welfare of children within their area and who are in need. Children seeking asylum who have no responsible adult to care for them (UASC) are considered to meet this 'in need' criterion. As UASC are LAC under Section 20 of the Children Act (1989) they are eligible for support in the same way as any other child in the care of the council. This duty of care remains in place until the young person is 21 and can be extended to 25 if the young person is in education.

15. With regard to local authorities, of particular importance is the role of elected Members. This report is the product of the work of the three Members drawn from the People Scrutiny Committee. The Members of this group have a keen interest in this area and have built up over time their experience and knowledge of many of the issues considered in this report. However, this report is highly relevant to all fifty Members of East Sussex County Council. This is because, when elected, all councillors take on the role of 'corporate parent' to children who are looked after by their local authority. This means all Members have a duty to take an interest in the wellbeing and development of all LAC, including UASC. For example, the Children and Social Work Act 2017 defines, for the first time in law, the role of Corporate Parents:

(a) to act in the best interests, and promote the physical and mental health and well-being, of those children and young people;

(b) to encourage those children and young people to express their views, wishes and feelings;

(c) to take into account the views, wishes and feelings of those children and young people;

(d) to help those children and young people gain access to, and make the best use of, services provided by the local authority and its relevant partners;

(e) to promote high aspirations, and seek to secure the best outcomes, for those children and young people;

(f) for those children and young people to be safe, and for stability in their home lives, relationships and education or work;

(g) to prepare those children and young people for adulthood and independent living.

(Definition set out in Part 1 Chapter 1 'Corporate Parenting Principles' of the 2017 Act as cited in the Local Government Association's 'Corporate parenting resource pack')

16. With the above in mind, the Review Board encourages all Members to engage with this report and have particular regard to the suggestions set out in Recommendation 6.

How do UASC arrive in the UK?

17. There are various routes by which unaccompanied children can arrive in the UK:

- **Spontaneous arrival**: Those young people who are discovered by Police or Border Force staff having arrived in the UK illegally (for example those found on lorries coming into Newhaven port). East Sussex County Council becomes responsible for these young people if they are found in the county.
- **Dublin iii regulation:** This EU law addresses where asylum should be claimed. If an unaccompanied minor has a family member in a member country, they can apply to join them and make their asylum claim in that country. A family member includes siblings.
- **Dubs amendment:** This relates to the UK's commitment to the resettlement of children in refugee camps in Europe.
- **Vulnerable children's resettlement scheme:** A scheme introduced in 2016 to resettle vulnerable children from the Middle East and North Africa in response to the Syrian Conflict.
- **National Transfer Scheme (NTS**). The location of UASC across the UK is not evenly spread and local authorities with "entry points" such as ports and airports have a disproportionate number of UASC in their areas. The NTS was set up to manage this with the aim of dispersing young people more evenly across the country. Local Authorities that signed up for the scheme agreed to take unaccompanied children up to 0.07% of the total child population.

Why do UASC come to the United Kingdom?

18. Many of the young people who come to the UK as unaccompanied minors are trying to escape conflict and persecution in their own country. In Eritrea, for example, many male children are forced into a brutal army regime. Conflicts in Afghanistan and Syria have resulted in many children being displaced and separated from their families. Some of these children will come to the UK as UASC.

19. Some children and young people are trafficked into the country by criminal gangs who intend to force them to work in places such as cannabis farms or nail bars; some are sold into sex work. A number of UASC report being "sold" to traffickers in their country of origin. Some children's journeys are arranged by their families. The children and their families believe they are being smuggled into the UK to look for a better life, only to find that they need to "work" indefinitely to pay off the family's debt. A small percentage of UASC come to escape poverty in their own country or because they believe they will have better life chances in the UK compared to their own country.

The situation in East Sussex

20. In East Sussex there is an estimated child population of 106,000 which means that the government figure for UASC that ESCC should care for is 74 (with regard to the NTS target discussed above in paragraph 17). At the time of producing this report, the Children's Services Department provide support for 71 young people who have sought asylum and are either currently under 18 years of age or who are now designated as care leavers (former UASC).

21. Of the 71 young people, 40 are under 18-year olds, and distributed amongst the following two age groups:

- 11 young people aged 13-15
- 29 young people aged 16-17

The breakdown of placements for this group are as follows:

- 10 in foster care locally (mixture of agency and in house)
- 4 in foster care out of county
- 2 in supported lodgings placements
- 20 in Supported Living accommodation
- 4 are currently missing. To clarify, UASC are a group of young people who are at high risk of going missing from care. This can be due to a distrust of professionals as a result of experiences in their countries of origin. It can also be because individual UASC are threatened or coerced into leaving local authority care to go to work to pay the 'debt' owed for their travel (if they were trafficked into the UK).

22. Of the remaining 31 young people who are 18 years old and over, 22 have 'leave to remain' status and 9 have 'without leave' status. The young people in this group are living in the following range of accommodation options:

- 11 are in Supported Living (see paragraph 24 for more detail).
- 7 are in Supported Living outside of East Sussex.
- 2 are in foster care – under "staying put" guidance (staying put refers to the situation where young people are able to remain with their foster carers after the age of 18).
- 11 are in their own accommodation.

23. As the area of asylum and immigration is complex and requires specialised knowledge, the Children's Services Department created a specialist service within the Through Care Service to focus specifically on UASC. This new service became fully operational at the end of November 2018. In the years prior to this new service, UASC were allocated a worker across the wider children's social work service, which sometimes led to an inconsistent approach to supporting the children and young people.

Types of placement

24. As UASC are LAC they must be placed in accommodation accordance with section 22C of the Children Act 1989. There is also statutory guidance on the placement of LAC set out in the *Children Act 1989 Guidance and Regulations Volume 2: Care Planning, Placement and Case Review.* This guidance states that a range of placement options may be suitable, which include:

- **Residential Care Home**: This is a placement within an Ofsted registered children's home.
- **Foster Care**: Foster care is a way for children to be cared for within a family setting when their own family is unable to care for them. It is considered temporary in that there is no legal split from the family (as with adoption), but can be long term where this is in the best interests of the child.

- **Supported Lodgings**: Supported Lodgings are a placement whereby a young person can live in a family home, but with a lower level of monitoring than in foster care. The young person will have their own room but will share the kitchen and bathroom facilities with the family or householder (referred to as 'host'). A host can be a family, couple or single person. The recruitment, scrutiny and approval of a host's accommodation is provided by the local authority or by an independent organisation.
- **Shared housing**: Shared housing is where a young person lives in a multiple occupancy house which is shared with other young people to provide peer support, with additional visiting support. This type of accommodation allows a young person to live with independence but usually with vising support to provide that additional level of care and support.
- **Supported accommodation**: Supported accommodation is a shared living space with multiple rooms and facilities. Supported accommodation typically is staffed 24/7 and these staff are trained in providing support and care to vulnerable young people. The young people staying in supported accommodation have a large amount of independence and therefore cook, manage their own money, do laundry and come and go as they please.

25. In its *'What is a suitable placement for an unaccompanied asylum-seeking child?'* guidance document, the DfE advises local authorities that:

"Good supported accommodation will provide a supportive environment in which unaccompanied asylum-seeking children can learn to develop and grow. This can serve to nurture a sense of belonging – strengthening their confidence and trust in adults – and providing them with the emotional stability needed to develop positive friendships and engage with their wider community. House meetings can provide an opportunity to encourage young people to eat together and share, whilst also providing them with a forum to air any frustrations within the community and to teach them resolution skills."

Findings and Recommendations

Mentoring Support

26. The Review Board was informed that, even with expert support, the process of adapting to life in the UK will often be challenging and bewildering for UASC. On one level there are complex legal processes, such as the asylum process. However, UASC also face barriers which can prevent them from successfully participating in a range of everyday tasks and activities. For example, understanding how and where to shop and how to access services can be a daunting prospect for a potentially traumatised young person who is not familiar with UK customs and social expectations and who may speak little or no English.

27. The Children's Services Department informed the Board that all UASC are provided with support which aims to help them develop their knowledge and confidence levels with respect to the type of everyday activities discussed above. Expert support is also provided regarding more complex matters such as navigating the asylum process. However, the department also indicated to the Board that there is a need to further develop the mentoring support it offers to UASC. More specifically, the department wants new UASC to be able to access enhanced support from volunteers, not only on practical matters like how to access services and deal with processes, but also advice on how to engage with local people and participate in activities which are both fun and interesting. Such activities are important as they build knowledge and experience of life in the UK. Such support would be particularly valuable were it to be drawn from former refugees who have settled successfully in the UK.

28. The Board therefore explored how the goal of providing an enhanced mentoring offer of this kind could be delivered. Members were particularly interested therefore in the support being provided by an initiative called the 'Hastings and Rother Buddy Scheme'. The scheme is run by 'Hastings Community of Sanctuary', a community group which provides support to asylum-seekers. The primary aim of the project is to assist newly arrived asylum-seekers with their integration into local communities. This is achieved by pairing families with a 'buddy' who has experience navigating the asylum process and who can provide support, friendship and guidance. The Board was also informed of other schemes in the county which aim to provide similar support. As things stand, however, this support is only currently available to adult asylum-seekers.

29. Members considered this gap in provision and whether there is scope to expand the types of scheme discussed above to include an expanded mentoring offer. The department agreed that further improvements in this area would be beneficial as it would not only provide increased access to practical advice and guidance, it would also help address the emotional and wellbeing needs of UASC and aid their integration. However, officers also indicated that the following factors should be taken into account:

- That it would be prudent to first conduct a pilot scheme. The department would then be able to use the evidence generated by the pilot to help inform a decision as to whether to explore with other providers the potential for expanding their schemes to include a mentoring offer for UASC.
- That for such initiatives to flourish, support from the voluntary sector would be essential and that stronger links with communities from different cultural backgrounds would greatly assist with this goal.
- That the department would value the support of Members to help generate public understanding and interest in supporting the mentoring scheme.

30. With the above in mind therefore, the Board discussed Members' roles both as community leaders and corporate parents. The Board agreed that Members will often be better placed than officers to both help raise awareness of the needs of UASC in their local communities and to make introductions with organisations and individuals who might be interested in assisting. However, the Board also agreed that to enable them to effectively assist, Members would need some support from the Department. The Board discussed therefore the development of a UASC toolkit which Members could refer to as needed. The toolkit could include information relating to the mentoring role and detail about what provision is available in the local area. The support Members could potentially provide to UASC is discussed in more detail later in this report.

Recommendation 1

The Children's Services Department to explore the potential for linking local UASC with the Hastings and Rother Buddy Project (HBRP) and, subject to the outcome of its work with the HRBP, to assess the feasibility of developing similar provision elsewhere within East Sussex in partnership with the voluntary sector.

Access to social activities and other opportunities that promote wellbeing

31. UASC are provided with access to the same range of social activities as other LAC. However, and given their unique challenges, the Board heard that UASC can still experience feelings of loneliness and isolation. For example, compelling evidence was provided by two former UASC witnesses (referred to in this report as YP1 and YP2). YP2 discussed how he 'often feels lonely and that he misses his family and cries when he thinks about home'.

32. Findings regarding feelings of isolation and loneliness amongst UASC and its impact have also been identified at the national level. For example, in 'Children's Voices – a review of evidence on the subjective wellbeing of children subject to immigration control in England (2017)', the Children's Commissioner found that:

> *"Establishing positive relationships in England was found to be a crucial determinant of migrant children's wellbeing, particularly for those who were on their own in the UK."*

33. The report then moves on to discuss how negative relationships were found to significantly undermine wellbeing, whereas positive relationships were viewed as important sources of support which strengthened self-esteem and enabled children and young people in this group to cope with stress and anxiety.

34. With the above in mind, the Board considered whether more could be done to help provide opportunities for UASC to form positive friendships with their peers and other young people from the local community. The department informed the Board that some local authorities have developed provision which aims to address this need. For example, the Board discussed a project based in Brighton called 'The Global Social Club', which is run by the refugee and asylum seeker support charity organisation, 'The Hummingbird Project'. The club, which was established in autumn 2017, is for 14-25 year olds and meets weekly. It provides a venue which allows young people from all backgrounds to meet and expand their social networks, increase their intercultural understanding, build their self-esteem, confidence, resilience and creative skills.

35. The club is run by a core group of six volunteers, although there are a significant number of other volunteers who, in addition to the club's central goal of providing a social space, also provide emotional, counselling and medical support, as well as legal advice. The club also offers a homework club whereby young people can receive educational support from a qualified teacher. Whilst the club is run by volunteers, some funding is provided by Brighton and Hove City Council. The Board also heard that, due to the trauma many of the attendees have faced, a key challenge for the club is to ensure that these young people feel comfortable and able to speak about their experiences (with there being no pressure to do so).

36. The Board explored the possibility of developing similar provision in East Sussex. Members agreed that providing a safe, nurturing environment where UASC would feel comfortable to meet and develop friendships would potentially help improve their emotional wellbeing. Such a venue could help UASC build their confidence and help them form connections with local sporting, cultural or community activities. The Board was informed that there are, for example, football clubs being set up across the region which welcome asylum-seekers.

37. Evidence from officers supported the view that the development of a hub which provides a safe social space for UASC to meet would potentially be beneficial and indicated that the department has some limited resource which would enable it to provide a venue for this where there is greatest need. However, the department also stated that, whilst it could potentially facilitate the development of provision of this kind, the delivery of the support at any venue(s) would be largely reliant on volunteers. Officers also indicated that the support of Members in helping to generate interest from volunteers from the local community and organisations would be welcome.

38. The Board agreed that there is scope for Members to assist with raising the profile of UASC and their needs and helping to identify volunteers who could help deliver support at social space of the kind discussed above. However, whilst it accepted that Members are well-placed to make connections with their local communities, the Board agreed that Members would need some minimal support from the Department. For example, with information about the agreed remit of the social space and how Members could refer potential volunteers on. As a result, the Board concluded that such information could also be added to the Member's toolkit which is discussed at Recommendation 6.

Recommendation 2

The Children's Services Department to assess the feasibility of developing in East Sussex a social space for UASC where they can meet with their peers and build their confidence, support networks and social skills.

Capacity and diversity of accommodation

39. A major challenge for the department is ensuring it meets its duty to provide sufficient accommodation for *all* LAC. However, the group which is the most difficult to find appropriate accommodation for are adolescents and within that group, UASC are especially challenging. This is because, as set out in the Council's 'Securing Sufficient Accommodation for Looked After Children 2017 to 2020':

- UASC sometimes require a very high level of supervision and liaison with a range of authorities in order to keep them safe and prevent them being exploited.
- For LAC who are not UASC, the department are normally able to provide potential carers with a detailed history and picture of their needs. This is not the case with many newly arrived UASC.

40. Officers informed the Board of the efforts made to secure placements that address the specific cultural and other needs of this group. However, and despite best efforts, children and young people in this group are much more likely to be placed outside of East Sussex than other LAC. The latest figures indicate that 35% of new placements of UASC were out of county compared to 11% of other LAC.

41. In the case of spontaneous arrivals, the challenge is even greater. The Board heard evidence from two UASC witnesses regarding their initial experience of the accommodation provided. Whilst YP2 was very positive about his current supported lodging, he felt the initial placement was not suitable for him. However, since living in his new supported lodgings, YP2 has become happier and feels that '..having a suitable living situation was important for the overall happiness of young people'.

42. In response, officers informed Members that although some young people may have some initial difficulties with their placements, the department must prioritise a young person's safety and well-being over other factors. This is a particular issue where it is necessary to source a placement in the context of some UASC arriving without any prior warning and the department needing to secure a place as quickly as possible.

43. In terms of trying to increase the capacity within East Sussex, the department informed the Board that it had tried block-booking entire sections of accommodation to decrease costs. Unfortunately, this had only provided a minimal reduction and so was not an effective solution. The Board heard therefore that the key challenge is finding both value for money and experienced providers of supported housing.

44. Members also heard that supported accommodation is not Ofsted inspected. Instead providers are monitored by District and Borough Councils as they fall under the category of 'houses of multiple occupancy'. There is also a geographic element to this challenge because most providers are situated in the urban coastal strip. There is a need therefore to develop further provision in other parts of the county which could help reduce the numbers of UASC placed out of county. Ultimately the department had tried a range of different tactics to increase its accommodation portfolio, but this had had mixed results.

45. The Board were concerned about the number of 'out of county' placements the council is forced to make and fully supported the aim of diversifying and increasing accommodation options. The Board therefore identified the potential for Members to assist by helping to forge links with different communities within their divisions. This could include conversations with voluntary groups, religious community leaders and the Black and Minority Ethnicity (BME) community to help raise awareness of the needs of UASC. This would not only potentially increase the number of accommodation options, it could also help deliver a more diverse range of accommodation that has a better chance of offering placements that more closely fit the faith and/or cultural background of individual UASC (if that is what they felt would help them). The Board also agreed that the department should review its approach to advertising for carers to see whether it could be adapted to better engage with the different communities discussed above. With a view to seeing if improvements could be made, the Board also concluded that the cultural training provided to existing foster carers and supported accommodation providers should be reviewed.

Recommendation 3

With a view to increasing both the amount and diversity of accommodation provision, the Children's Services Department to explore further the options for raising awareness amongst local communities of the specific accommodation needs of UASC. This to include:

- **reviewing its advertising campaigns to include an element which highlights the specific needs of UASC.**
- **assisting Members to foster connections with different sections of their local communities.**
- **more cultural awareness training for existing foster carers and supported accommodation providers which seeks to address this need.**

Work experience

46. Work experience provides young people with a valuable introduction to the work environment and it can help students decide on future career paths or study options. It can also help develop a young person's employability skills which is consistently identified by employers as being a high priority.

47. However, arranging work experience for UASC is more complex than for other young people. This is because, apart from the issues relating to their unique background circumstances, there are legal duties that restrict the scope of such activities. For example, in its 'Permission to work and volunteering for asylum seekers', the Home Office states that '*Children under the age of 18 should not be given permission to take employment. However, unaccompanied asylum-seeking children or children dependent on their parents are entitled to secondary education whilst their claim is being considered. They are also able to take part in work experience placements or training if that forms part of their education'.* Furthermore, UASC are entitled to volunteer, but only for charities or public sector organisations, not private organisations.

48. With the above restrictions in mind the Board were informed that despite efforts to provide such opportunities, there is a need to identify further work experience options for UASC in East Sussex. As a result, the department were therefore seeking support from Members to help it identify such opportunities from within local communities.

49. In terms of the process of organising work experience, the Board were informed that placements can be organised by the schools and colleges themselves or they can purchase support via East Sussex County Council's Work Experience Service (WEX) traded service offer. The WEX service provides access to a range of work experience placements for pupils and includes a bespoke placement matching service for vulnerable learners which ensures they are placed in safe and appropriate work placements. Support is provided for both the learner and the employer. The Board heard that this service would be potentially applicable to UASC. The Board were also informed that the service is offered to schools and colleges who purchase the service for specific cohorts of pupils and it is a matter for individual schools and colleges to decide whether they want to purchase support for any UASC within their school population.

50. The Board accepted that the legal restrictions placed on UASC, together with their unique circumstances, makes delivering work experience a significant challenge. The Board also agreed that there is a role for local Members who could help make connections with public bodies and voluntary sector organisations who might be open to providing appropriate work experience placements.

51. The Board also noted that at the time of its consideration of the evidence for this area, no UASC were accessing a work experience placement via the WEX traded service offer. Furthermore, it was not clear to the Board whether any UASC had been offered work experience placements via schools who make their own arrangements. Given this finding, the Board recommended that the Department consider exploring whether more could be done to raise awareness of the work experience needs of UASC with schools and colleges, so that they are aware of the legal framework for work experience for this group and what support is available to them to help ensure placements are arranged.

Recommendation 4

The Children's Services Department to explore the options for increasing access to work experience opportunities for UASC. This to include:

- **assessing the potential for the Department to raise awareness of the work experience needs of UASC with schools and colleges and to review the current levels of work experience placements for UASC.**
- **Members to support this process by using their local leadership position to help raise awareness of the work experience needs of UASC and to help foster more work experience placements with public sector organisations and the voluntary sector.**

English as an Additional Language support

52. As discussed elsewhere in this report, UASC often arrive with little or no proficiency in English. In this context, the Board heard evidence about the importance of developing this fundamental skill. For example, the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Social Integration states in its '*Integration not Demonisation'* report that:

> *"The ability to understand and speak English to a reasonable standard is a prerequisite for meaningful engagement with most British people and the key to full participation in British society."*

53. Even those with language skills which are sufficient for everyday conversations will still find their progress inhibited if they do not become competent users of the language. For example, the Board were interested to hear about the experience of YP1.

54. This young person explained that when he first arrived in the UK, he was keen to start working and earning money as soon as possible. He had at that time only very basic English language skills, but these were sufficient to enable him to work as a labourer on construction sites in London. However, YP1 eventually became disillusioned and concluded that he would not be able to progress without developing his English. He therefore regretted not fully engaging with the English language support that was offered to him when he first arrived. In conclusion, YP1 informed the Board that he wished he had been more strongly encouraged to focus on learning English as an immediate priority. This view was shared by YP2.

55. The Board noted the negative practical consequences for YP1 of not developing his English language skills. For example, when he later decided to pursue a career, YP1 was unable to enrol on his preferred college course because his English was not of the required standard.

56. Officers informed the Board that all UASC are provided with English language support. However, they noted the comments of YP1 and undertook to review the approach to the advice provided to newly arrived UASC regarding the importance of an early focus on English tuition. The department also informed the Board that it is aware of local authorities where accommodation providers are commissioned to deliver intensive support packages during the first 4-6 weeks after arrival and that these packages of support include intensive English language tuition. Having said that, the department also stated that providing access to English language tuition is a further area of challenge, as there is a shortage of English as an Additional Language (EAL) teachers.

57. With regard to the situation at local educational institutions, the Board heard that whilst colleges are often helpful and do their best to accommodate individuals, if a new UASC arrives mid-term or the course is already at capacity, finding a suitable alternative can be difficult and expensive. With regard to compulsory school age children, the Board were informed that schools are entitled to use the Pupil Premium to fund EAL tuition. However, there is a particular challenge relating to UASC who are in Year 11. This is because integrating an asylum-seeking young person in these circumstances can be very challenging for the school, as the cohort they are joining is fully focused on their GCSE exams.

58. In response to the evidence received, the Board concluded that it is essential UASC prioritise developing their English language skills. The Board had particular regard to what could be done to focus on this need within the first six months of arrival. The Board agreed therefore that the feasibility of providing intensive language courses for newly arrived UASC should be explored. The Board also concluded that the department should review its guidance to officers and UASC on this area to see whether more could be done to encourage an early focus on developing proficiency in English. In reaching this conclusion, the Board noted the challenges facing the Department regarding the availability of EAL tutors. The Board agreed therefore that Members could potentially assist by helping to identify individuals and organisations in their local communities who would be able to provide EAL support for UASC.

Recommendation 5

The Children's Services Department to explore how an increased early focus on English as an additional language could be provided to UASC. This to include a review of:

- **the Department's guidance to UASC and officers on this area; and**
- **the potential feasibility of providing intensive language courses which could include commissioning accommodation providers to deliver intensive support packages within the first 4-6 weeks of arrival.**

Member engagement and support for UASC

59. The Board heard throughout this review that there is a need to raise awareness amongst the public and local organisations about the specific needs of UASC. The Board noted that there are 'mixed attitudes' towards asylum-seekers nationally and, as a result, this group can face discrimination. The Board agreed therefore that an increased public understanding of the specific needs of this vulnerable group might not only generate further support of the kind discussed in this report, it could also help combat some of the negative stereotypes UASC can sometimes face.

60. The Board therefore discussed the local leadership role of councillors and how this leaves Members well-placed to help raise the profile of UASC, make connections and generate new leads for the department. In support of this perspective, the Local Government Association states that:

> *"..councillors are uniquely placed to develop strategies, shape thinking and take an active lead locally because they alone have been democratically elected to represents the interests of the people and the council. This gives them a legitimacy and a mandate no other local body or individual has, apart of course, from MPs" ('A councillor's workbook on community leadership').*

61. The Department agreed that Members have a unique role and that effectively utilizing this 'resource' could have a significant and positive impact on the range of support available to UASC in East Sussex. The Board therefore discussed the types of issues which Members could assist with. This included Members helping to:

- identify individuals or organisations that could provide more social opportunities, such as becoming involved in community events;
- make links with groups from diverse cultural backgrounds in the community who might be prepared to accommodate UASC specifically (groups which the department might otherwise struggle to engage with); and
- identify resources in their local communities that would be able and willing to support UASC through work experience placements or providing support with English language tuition and mentoring.

62. Whilst keen to find ways for Members to assist, the Board also asked for clarification as to what practical support might be provided by the department. Furthermore, whilst the Board accepted that each Member should seek to play an active role in supporting UASC (and other LAC), they agreed that many Members will need some updated guidance as to how they can fulfil this role. The Board therefore discussed the potential for developing a UASC toolkit for all Councillors, with consideration being given as to whether the toolkit could provide clear guidance on:

- helping Members to understand their role as a corporate parent;
- the key facts and issues relating to UASC (and other LAC);
- those areas where the Department would like Member assistance; and
- how Members should interact with UASC and how to refer them on for assistance.

63. Officers agreed that Member assistance could provide a significant boost to efforts to improve support for UASC. It was also agreed that there is scope to develop a practical toolkit that individual Members could use as a resource to help them generate interest in supporting UASC. With regard to its development, and to help produce a document that is tailored to the needs of Members, the Board also offered its assistance to the Department with drafting the toolkit.

Recommendation 6

To help expand the range of support available in East Sussex, the Children's Services Department to develop a UASC toolkit for Members The toolkit to provide guidance on:

- **the key challenges facing UASC – such as accommodation needs, opportunities for social activities, access to work experience and English language support;**
- **what assistance is currently available for UASC;**
- **how Members can develop links with key organisations and communities.**
- **the process for referring potential leads to the Department.**

Conclusions

64. The Board's primary goal throughout this review has been to identify what can be done to further assist with helping young asylum-seekers develop their confidence, skills and improve their emotional well-being as they build a new life in the United Kingdom. The Board concluded that the Children's Services Department have already developed a highly effective service which is well-attuned to addressing the needs of this especially vulnerable group of young people. However, and given the complex and evolving nature of the challenges facing the department, the Board have developed a number practical recommendations which it hopes will further complement the work already being undertaken in this area. The recommendations recognise the role of elected Members and how all councillors can play a role in supporting this group, the potential for the wider community to provide support and suggestions as to how the unique needs of UASC could be addressed.

Appendix: Terms of reference, membership and evidence

Scope and terms of reference

The People Scrutiny Committee appointed a Scrutiny Review Board to consider and make recommendations on matters relating to the support provided for Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children. The Board agreed it would focus on exploring the potential for:

- increasing and diversifying the capacity and range of providers of accommodation for UASC;
- delivering further opportunities that improve the wellbeing of UASC and provide more opportunities for social activities, access to mentoring, English language support and work experience.
- Members to help with raising awareness and support for UASC in their local communities, including generating more enquiries from a wider range of people interested in supporting UASC.

Board Membership and project support

Review Board Members: Councillors Kathryn Field (Chair), Trevor Webb and Francis Whetstone.

The Project Manager was Stuart McKeown, Senior Democratic Services Adviser, with project support provided by Aaron Sams, Democratic Services Officer.

Sally Carnie, Head of Looked After Children Services, Children's Services Department, provided ongoing support to the Board throughout the review.

Witnesses providing evidence

The Board would like to thank all the witnesses who provided evidence in person:

Young people

UASC Care Leaver 1

UASC Care Leaver 2

Community and voluntary sector

Rossana Leal – Founder and Director of The Hastings and Rother Buddy Project

Sarah Bennett – Service Manager of The Hummingbird Refugee Project

ESCC officers

Liz Rugg – Assistant Director, Early Help and Social Care, Children's Services Department

Sally Carnie – Head of Looked After Children Services, Children's Services Department

Chelsea Walsh – Practice Manager, Children's Services Department

Peter Richards – Operations Manager, Looked After Children, Children's Services Department

Pamela Middleton – Personal Adviser, Children's Services Department

South East Strategic Partnership for Migration

Sarah Spain - Principal Social Worker for UASC, South East Strategic Partnership for Migration

Review Board meeting dates

26 October 2018

17 January 2019

10 April 2019

24 July 2019

Evidence papers

Item	Date considered
Seeking Support – a guide to the rights and entitlements of separated children (Coram Children's Charity)	12.10.18
Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children – Corporate Parenting Panel report	19.10.18
Discussion document produced by Children's Services department	17.01.19
Global Social Club: 2018 Evaluation Document	22.05.19
Article on the Sussex Express website (published 15 May 2019) regarding a former UASC Care Leaver	05.06.19
Home Office guidance document - Permission to work and volunteering for asylum seekers	05.06.19
Notes from a telephone interview with Rossana Leal – Founder and Director of The Hastings and Rother Buddy Project	05.06.19
Notes from a telephone interview with Sarah Bennett – Service Manager of The Hummingbird Refugee Project	05.06.19

Contact officer for this review: Stuart McKeown, Senior Democratic Services Adviser and School Appeals Manager

Telephone: 01273 481583

Email: stuart.mckeown@eastsussex.gov.uk

East Sussex County Council, County Hall, St Anne's Crescent, Lewes BN7 1UE