

Controlling Migration Project: *Building foundations: Meeting the needs of unaccompanied asylum seeking children (UASC)*

In February 2018, Hackney Children and Families Service (CFS) was awarded £265,866 from the Department for Communities and Local Government's (now the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, MHCLG) Controlling Migration Fund for a two-year project: *Building foundations: Meeting the needs of unaccompanied asylum seeking children (UASC)*.

This project consists of two strands:

- foster carer & supported lodgings recruitment
- developing independence & integration

Context

As of July 2018, Hackney supports 34 UASC, of whom 29 are aged 16/17. Just under three-quarters of the cohort are of three nationalities: Albanian, Vietnamese and Eritrean. Additionally, Hackney currently supports 37 former UASC (i.e. 18+) as care leavers. Whilst Hackney is committed to meeting the immediate and longer term needs of vulnerable UASC, unaccompanied children and young people present particular and sometimes distinct needs, and it is for this reason that we sought and secured funding from MHCLG.

Foster carer & supported lodgings recruitment

We have an experienced fostering recruitment team but its priority and resourcing is necessarily focused on increasing the number of in-house foster carers and supported lodgings households that meet the needs of the majority of our looked after children and young people. The project therefore seeks to build upon the recruitment team's expertise and capacity through the employment of a Foster Carer and Supported Lodgings Recruiter focusing on the Albanian, Eritrean and Vietnamese communities.

Through the appointment of a dedicated recruiter, CFS will recruit and train additional foster carers and supported lodgings hosts – a flexible option for young people who still require support but are relatively self-sufficient. By being able to offer these vulnerable young people a period in foster care or supported lodgings, we would be creating opportunities to provide more intensive support than is usually possible in semi-independent accommodation and build their resilience to support them in moving towards independence. Alongside training and development related to the specific needs of UASC, foster carers and supported lodging households would be trained in supporting the young people to navigate the asylum process and help them prepare for possible return to their country of origin. Furthermore, placing UASC in local placements will allow them easier access to Hackney's universal services and better facilitate the integration & independence work outlined below.

The post holder will be a qualified social worker, working full-time, with their priorities being to develop links with the identified communities; recruit and assess 10 foster care or supported lodgings households; and train those households in the specific needs of UASC (e.g. trauma, displacement) and the asylum process.

This element of the project will also have the wider benefit of establishing and refining our processes for recruiting from under-represented communities, to some extent future-proofing our offer should the demographics of our UASC population change over time.

The National Transfer Scheme commits local authorities to supporting UASC to the equivalent of 0.07% of their local child population. On this basis Hackney could be asked to support up to 42 young people. Developing our capacity and expertise will contribute toward the Council's ongoing ability to meet this obligation.

It is envisaged that a UASC network may be established through the North London Adoption and Fostering Consortium by which good practice and possibly even placements can be shared, especially as some local authorities in the Consortium are also in receipt of funding from the Controlling Migration Fund.

Developing independence & integration

Care planning for Hackney UASC takes into account their experiences in their country of origin and how they came to be in the UK, with a strong emphasis on language skills and education. Social workers aim to provide support in socialising UASC with other young people and signposting to support groups, organisations and services available to them. Hackney also recognises its responsibility to the local and wider community in ensuring unaccompanied asylum seeking children and young people integrate and are well-versed in social norms and behaviour, such as those relating to gender and diversity. This practical support is essential for vulnerable young people to support them to assimilate and integrate into the community, build their support networks and therefore reduce their vulnerability and isolation.

It is in the interests of the young people, the council and the Home Office that asylum applications are made in a timely way, with young people receiving realistic advice and support. To effectively support young people through these processes, social workers need to be able to access robust and practical advice on asylum processes to build up their knowledge base. It is also imperative that planning throughout the asylum process take a dual approach, considering the longer-term and care leaving aspects of a successful claim and the need to be realistic and equip young people with appropriate skills in the event of a return to their country of origin. Hackney employs the services of a Home Office worker on a 0.2FTE basis to conduct immigration status check on families and individuals with regard to their *having no recourse to public funds* allowing scope for closer working relations between the Council and the Home Office in relation to UASC.

The project will support UASC in care, and those who have left care, by providing additional capacity and expertise through the recruitment of a specialist Leaving Care UASC Adviser to support unaccompanied asylum seeking young people with integration, the asylum application process and building independence, thereby freeing social workers to concentrate on meeting the emotional needs of these and other children. Better planning, with direct input from the Home Office, will make for swifter resolution to asylum processes.

Given the predominance of 16/17 year old UASC in Hackney, it is envisaged that the UASC Adviser will largely work with young people approaching care leaver status (i.e. those on the way to independence) and, to a lesser extent, former UASC in receipt of leaving care services. The Adviser will work closely with the Recruitment post holder in building and utilising support networks amongst the Albanian, Eritrean and Vietnamese communities.

The full-time post holder will:

- Provide practical support such as local orientation and awareness (e.g. using public transport, registering with a GP).
- Promote community and leisure opportunities to reduce social isolation and build resilience & support networks.
- Seek and create opportunities to broker and guide mentoring relationships between former and current UASC.

- Liaise with the Virtual School for Looked After Children and voluntary & community groups in Hackney to support further/higher education, training, work experience, volunteering and English as a Second Language provision as appropriate
- Check and advise on the asylum process, particularly in co-ordination with the Home Office worker to clarify status, aid planning in the case of repatriation (including possible contact with overseas agencies or individuals) and preparing young people for the possibility of adverse decisions.
- Provide advice and consultation to practitioners working with UASC.
- Ensure that appropriate learning about UASC is fed into the Contextual Safeguarding Project and vice versa.

It is envisaged that the Adviser will develop understanding and expertise in the Council around the asylum process and attendant planning that can be perpetuated beyond the scope of the project.

Update

CFS have successfully recruited to the two posts detailed above. The Leaving Care UASC Adviser will be commencing employment on 15th October 2018 with the Foster Carer and Supported Lodgings Recruiter due to start shortly after.

A key component of the project is its independent evaluation and, to this end, CFS is working to commission an external evaluator. A shortlist has been prepared and the bid parameters will be sent to prospective evaluators in September 2018, with a final decision being made in October 2018 for the evaluation to begin in November alongside the work of the two post holders.

The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government has recently released more funding to support UASC, and CFS are currently looking into applying for further monies to support new and effective ways of supporting unaccompanied children and young people.

A learning event in late November 2018 organised by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government will allow Hackney to discuss the project with other local authorities who are in receipt of funding from the Controlling Migration Fund, allowing an opportunity to share good practice.