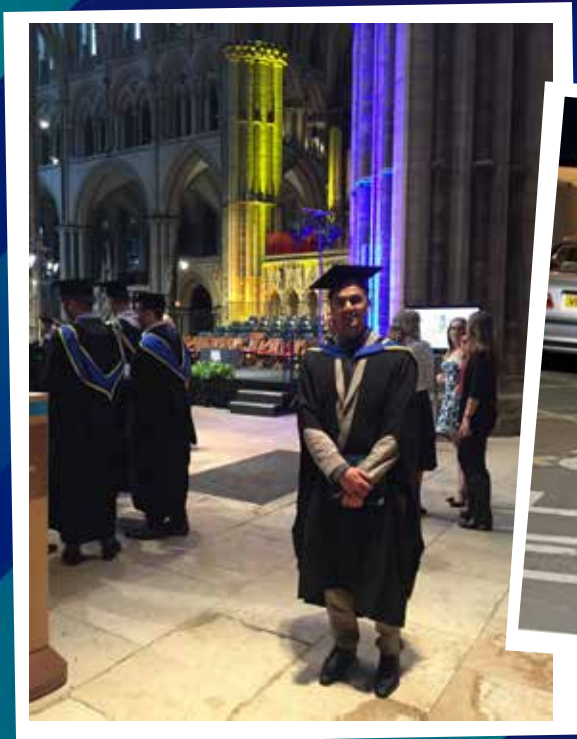


# Supporting Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children at School



## Who are UASC?

An unaccompanied asylum-seeking child (UASC):

- is outside his or her country of origin
- is under 18 years of age
- has not been accompanied by a close relative when travelling to the UK

Children may be fleeing persecution or have been trafficked from any part of the world but some of the most common countries of origin for UASC in the care of Leicestershire County Council (LCC) are Afghanistan, Albania, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Iraq, Iran, Sudan, Kurdistan and Vietnam. Most, but not all, are male. Many are aged between 16 and 18 but we have had children as young as 8 in the care of Leicestershire.

UASC have been separated from their families. Some are able to keep in touch with family members once they have arrived in the UK but for many, it is unlikely that they will ever see their friends and family again or even know whether they are safe.

Many of the young people have had adverse, often traumatic, experiences prior to joining your school, such as war, violence, persecution or exploitation. Many UASC arriving in the UK have undertaken a difficult, long and distressing journey to get here. Trauma has been a feature of their lives and they often arrive in a state of very poor physical and mental health, some

showing signs of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

For these children and young people, education can play a huge part in their integration and success in the UK. For their own wellbeing, it is imperative that they are assimilated into a school/college as soon as possible. They are likely to require additional pastoral support, but schools and colleges are places where they can experience warmth, acceptance, belonging, safety and where they can thrive.

Some UASC may have little or no experience of education and so will require support, not only to settle into the UK but also into school life. However, others may have received an education and will arrive with some English language skills and a knowledge of a range of different subjects. In Eritrea, for instance, children are often taught all subjects in English from Year 6 onwards.

In our experience, most UASC have a real drive to learn and to succeed and will be conscientious members of your school community. They bring a wide range of experiences and talents and often, a readiness to participate in school activities. Once they have mastered English (and this can be a relatively quick process) they often make significant progress.

## What happens when they arrive?

The UASC that LCC supports are usually spontaneous arrivals, which means they have been found in part of Leicestershire and then taken to a local police station.

It is important to ascertain whether or not young people are under 18, as they usually arrive without documents. Whilst at the police station, social workers will complete a brief enquiry to try and verify that the young person is under 18 and therefore needs to be accommodated by the local authority (LA). This is undertaken by one or two social workers, with an interpreter present. Sometimes, there is doubt as to whether a young person is under 18 or not and a full age assessment is planned. In the meantime, the young person is

given the benefit of the doubt and is accommodated (usually under Section 20, voluntarily accommodated, with the LA assuming parental responsibility) in line with the age they claim to be.

If the young person is 16 or under, s/he is usually placed in a foster placement that night, whilst those older (17 or 18) are usually placed in a semi-independent, supported placement. The social worker will then produce a care plan which will include education.

Note: Those deemed to be over 18 are not accommodated by the LA and become the responsibility of the Home Office.


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## Pre-entry PEP

Within the first two weeks of an UASC being accommodated by the LA, a pre-entry PEP meeting will be held. At this meeting, the UASC Education Improvement Officer from Leicestershire Virtual School, with the help of an interpreter, will try to ascertain what education, if any, the young person has had in their own country and their ability to speak, listen, read and write in both their own language and English. The young person's social worker will also usually be present at this meeting along

with the foster carer/support worker.

Following this initial PEP meeting, the social worker will apply for a school or college place for the young person. The Virtual School will consider funding some 1:1 ESOL tuition whilst a school/college place is secured.





## Age Assessment

Even if an UASC has been accommodated by the LA, others may still raise concerns about the exact age of the young person. In these situations, a full Merton compliant age assessment will take place. A full Merton compliant age assessment involves two social workers, usually with an interpreter, conducting a number of interviews with the young person in the presence of an independent person. Following these interviews, the young person will be assigned an age by the social workers. It is worth noting that this can take anything from a few weeks to several months.

If the young person is deemed to have been over 18 when they arrived in the Leicestershire, they will then be transferred for adult support through the Home Office. If they are unhappy with the given age, they can appeal the age assessment. Sometimes, young people who are appealing the initial decision about their age are brought into care for a period of time whilst their age assessment is carried out.

**NOTE:** These age assessments could well be happening whilst the young person is at school and could impact upon their emotional wellbeing, add to the trauma they have already experienced and affect their progress at school/college.

Prior to the outcome of the full Merton compliant age assessment, the LA and other professional organisations have to assume the young person is the age that was given when s/he was initially accommodated by the LA.



## Legal Process

Once the UASC has been accommodated, work will start on their asylum claim. As with the age assessment, this can be a very stressful experience and is likely to impact on their emotional well-being. Furthermore, they may need time off school to attend solicitor appointments and interviews.

Below is a guide to the legal process but the various stages often take a lot longer and some young people can wait years for a decision about their asylum status to be made.

1. The First Reporting Event is usually done over the phone between the social workers and the Home Office case owner, initially just to provide the young person's details.
2. Newly-arrived unaccompanied minors will be required to attend a screening interview within 2-4 weeks at the Home Office. For this appointment, they should be accompanied by a responsible adult, e.g. a legal representative, keyworker/social worker or foster carer.
3. UASC will be issued with an ARC (Application Registration Card).
4. In the first 4 weeks, following screening, young people will also need to see their solicitor to receive legal advice on their asylum claim and complete their SEF (statement of evidence) form, in most cases, young people will need to be accompanied to these meetings.
5. The UASC will be invited back to the Home Office for a substantive interview.
6. A decision on their asylum claim is made following the substantive interview.

NOTE: Whilst awaiting a result of their asylum claim, UASC cannot work or undertake an apprenticeship.

## Supporting UASC to settle into school


It is vital that staff working with UASC are aware that trauma can have a significant and long-lasting impact on a child's development and emotional wellbeing. Many UASC have experienced love and care from their families but have subsequently faced traumatic life events. Trusting relationships with caregivers help to mitigate the effect of stress but UASC may have been subjected to adverse experiences when separated from their families and so have had to cope with these experiences alone.

UASC may not have attended a school before and even if they have, they may be overwhelmed by the size of your school, unfamiliar school routines and being in mixed-sex classes. They may have no experience of practical subjects like drama, music or design and technology. Cultural sensitivity is vital. There may be issues that arise and will need consideration e.g. a reluctance to change in front of others or a female student wishing to cover her arms and legs during PE lessons.

Be aware that language difficulties make it difficult for students to express their views, ideas and concerns. Try to find out what their behaviour is communicating, for example, at one school, it was assumed that a student who spent lunchtimes in the library was struggling with friendships. In fact, he had arrived from Sudan during the winter and was struggling to adapt to the cold weather.

### The Virtual School recommends the following strategies to support UASC at your school:

- Identify a key adult or a key adult team to work with the young person. Give the young person a card with the name and picture of their key adult/s on it. The key adult could meet and greet the UASC in the mornings to help them settle in each day.
- Introduce the student to other key members of staff at school who can be accessed for support.
- Ensure staff who are going to work with the young person know how to pronounce his/her name properly. Find out how to say *hello* to them in their first language e.g. *Selam* (pronounced *Salam*) is Tigrinyan for *hello, peace be with you* and is used by many young people from Eritrea.
- Get to know the student, find out their interests and talents. Can these be nurtured through school clubs/activities?
- Provide a tour of the school, identifying key areas e.g. where to find key adults, toilets, canteen. Provide a map of the school with these rooms/areas clearly identified.
- For those who need it, identify a “safe space” – a place to go if they need help or are feeling overwhelmed.
- Give the young person a copy of their timetable. Pictures or photos are helpful. Go through the school day e.g. lunch, breaks, change of lessons. How will they transition from one location to another?

- A peer buddy (someone at school who speaks the same language) would be great to take them around the school at first. Some schools have a school ambassador for new arrivals.
  - Ensure there is good communication with the foster carer and social worker.
  - Consider creating a bespoke timetable. Learning yet another foreign language may not be of use, whereas the more English/EAL lessons the better.
  - Consider a short-term “new to English” withdrawal group which could kickstart students’ English and preclude the need for support later on.
  - Provide LSA support in some lessons, at least initially, with joint planning between class/subject teachers and support staff.
  - Encourage students to contribute to the lesson by using their home language or non-verbal communication initially.
  - Don’t worry if students say very little at first as plenty of listening time is important when starting to learn a new language. Allow time for the student to ‘tune in’ to the sounds and intonation of the new language. Even if the student has previously been to school in their country of origin, the teaching style may have been more like a lecture, so they may not be used to interacting with others in the classroom.
  - Avoid sitting/working alone: place them next to a supportive peer.
  - Use the internet, e.g. first language versions of some key texts, online bilingual dictionaries.
  - If using an interpreter, ensure they speak the same language and dialect. You can liaise with the young person’s social worker about using an interpreter.
  - It is usual to place students in the correct year group for their age but occasionally, a Year 11 arrival is better served by working in a Year 10 group, especially if the focus in Year 11 is on upcoming GCSE exams.
  - Build specific topics and activities into the curriculum and school assemblies e.g. consideration of refugee issues within history topics or a school assembly during World Refugee Week in June.
  - Students could create a display board about their country of origin to raise awareness and ensure their heritage is valued. There may be traditions they could share e.g. songs, dances.
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## Leicestershire Virtual School Support

We will work closely with you to improve the educational progress and outcomes of UASC placed in your school. Our support can include:

- Advice and support: we have a dedicated UASC Education Improvement Officer who also liaises closely with the UASC Social Care team.
- Termly PEP meetings, often chaired by our UASC Education Improvement Officer.
- Discussions with you about how the termly PPP funding can be used to further enhance education.
- Collection of data and tracking the young person's educational progress.
- Additional funding for 1:1 tuition or LSA support.
- Liaison with other agencies.
- Signposting the UASC and foster carer to other avenues of support such as the After 18 Organisation and Freedom Youth Club.
- Raising aspirations through events such as university experience days and other Virtual School events.

### JARGON BUSTER!

Some common acronyms you might hear in meetings involving UASC

**ARC** - Application Registration Card - The ARC is a credit card-sized plastic card issued by the Home Office to individuals who claim asylum.

**BRP** – Biometric Residence Card - The BRP card is given automatically to a young person if their immigration application is approved. It may well have their NI number on it.

**IHA** – Initial Health Assessment.

**HTMS** - Human Trafficking and Modern Slavery.

**NRM** – National Referral Mechanism - The NRM is the system by which victims of modern slavery are identified and provided with support.

**PVOT** – Potential Victim of Trafficking.

**SEF** – Statement of Evidence Form - the SEF is completed with a solicitor and is used as evidence to support the young person's claim for asylum.