

Reform of Children's Social Care

Making children's social care reform work for children subject to immigration control

This briefing authored by the Refugee and Migrant Children's Consortium (RMCC) for local authorities in England explores the changes proposed in the [Department for Education's 'Stable Homes, Built on Love' Strategy](#) which sets out the Government's plans for reform of children's social care in England.

As a consortium of organisations dedicated to the welfare of migrant children we want to see this strategy succeed in improving outcomes for children in care and care leavers across the country. The strategy, however, does not engage in detail with how the reforms will affect children and their families when they are subject to immigration control. This briefing is designed to support local authorities when they are considering how to implement reform in ways that will ensure children subject to immigration control are supported in the best ways possible.

Whilst the Government's strategy addressed all areas of children's social care, this briefing focuses exclusively on proposals that will affect children in care and care leavers.

If you would like support to consider other areas of the strategy you may find [these briefings on the Independent Review of Children's Social Care recommendations helpful](#), or you can get in touch with the Refugee and Migrant Children's Consortium.

Uncertainty for children subject to immigration control

It is a highly uncertain time for children in care and care leavers subject to immigration control. The immigration and nationality needs of children and young people in the care system, if left unaddressed, can have a significant negative impact on their futures. These impacts are exacerbated by current public policy and fast-moving changes in immigration and nationality law that are difficult for social workers, personal advisors and other practitioners to keep up with.

A recent survey by the South London Refugee Association (SLRA) and Coram Children's Legal Centre (CCLC) suggests that around 1 in 10 children in care may have immigration needs of some sort.¹ Whilst there are many different ways in which children in care and care leavers might be subject to immigration control, there are some key groups that provide a good lens to use when considering how best to support all children subject to immigration control. Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children, undocumented children, European children and children with temporary status are four important groups to consider when exploring the key immigration challenges that children in care and care leavers may face. These groups are briefly outlined below. There are however other groups and a [fuller description of different statuses is available here](#).

Who is subject to immigration control?

Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children (UASC)

Children who are seeking asylum having arrived in the UK alone and without family/guardians. This group is often the focus of most discussions about children subject to immigration control and children in care/care leavers as they make up 7% of children in care and 26% of care leavers aged 19-21.

¹ <https://www.slr-a.org.uk/campaigns/taking-care/>

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These young people will need significant support to gain status and adjust to life in the UK. [The Young Asylum Guide, created by Right to Remain provides a good overview of the asylum process](#)

Undocumented Children

Children might be undocumented, meaning they have no immigration status in the UK, for a range of reasons. They could have arrived with their families as children and overstayed their visa, entered the UK clandestinely (e.g. as a victim of trafficking), or could have been born in the UK but were not eligible for citizenship.

These young people will need early advice and support to gain status, as many may be eligible to apply to register as British. However, if their lack of status is not identified and addressed they will face significant challenges in accessing many public services, especially after age 18..

Kids in Need of Defense UK (KIND UK) provides [a range of briefings summarising some of the ways that a child's immigration status can be improved or they can acquire British citizenship](#)

Project for the Registration of Children as British Citizens (PRCBC) provides [a range of briefings and information about registering children and young people for British Citizenship](#)

European Children

The children of EU citizens, who may or may not be EU nationals themselves, and who were not born British citizens have specific immigration needs. If they arrived before the end of December 2020, they would likely have been eligible for status under the EU settlement scheme (EUSS), which closed in June 2021. However, some children will have missed this deadline and will now require support. Children of EU nationals arriving from 1 January 2021 onwards are subject to a different immigration regime.

Whilst young people who have gained status under the EUSS will have relatively secure immigration status they may wish to become a British Citizen to provide long-term security. Those who missed the deadline will need significant support to regularise their status.

The government has provided a [toolkit](#) for local authorities in supporting children and families through the EUSS.

Children with Temporary Status or Limited Leave to Remain

Many children may have a visa so they can live in the UK. There are many different types of visa and each lasts for a different amount of time. If the visa is not renewed on time, children are at risk of becoming undocumented in the UK.

Care Plans for children who are subject to immigration control should be up-to-date in recording the child/young person's immigration status and when any leave to remain expires, and when they may become eligible for British citizenship. Applications to renew visas should be made accurately and on time and there should be a clear plan to obtain permanent status in the UK as soon as possible. Applications for British citizenship should be made as soon as a child is eligible, and may not always be dependent on regularising the child's immigration status first.

For more information exploring how best to support children in care who have immigration or citizenship needs, SLRA and CCLC's '[Taking Care' Report](#) and SLRA's 'Immigration support for children in care and care leavers - Policy Resource for Local Authorities' which can be found on the [Taking Care page](#) of SLRA's website provide a range of helpful advice to ensure all children's immigration needs are responded to and recognised.

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Children subject to immigration control find themselves in a very challenging context. Over many years the government’s ‘Hostile Environment’ policies have made everyday life in the UK very difficult for children and young people subject to immigration control who do not have secure and long-term immigration status in this country. Access to banking, housing, health services, education and benefits can all be restricted dependent on immigration status.² For these reasons it is crucial that any children who are undocumented, or have temporary status, gain long-term status in the UK as quickly as possible.

European children, who before the UK left the European Union were not subject to immigration control, now are. Many will have obtained status through the EUSS that closed in 2021 but it may now be in their best interests to secure their status as a British citizen – they will need help and support to do so. For those who did not manage to apply for settled status before the EUSS scheme closed, it is crucial that steps are taken immediately to address this and secure status in the UK or else they (along with their future children) could risk being undocumented.

Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children and young people face a particularly difficult environment. The Home Office has now created a parallel children’s social care system through its accommodation of children in hotels and other housing upon their arrival in the UK instead of moving them swiftly into local authority care.³ The breakdown in Home Office decision-making means that waiting times to have a decision on asylum applications are now at record levels leaving young people in limbo.⁴ Age assessments create a climate of fear and distrust and can lead to children being housed in adult accommodation or detained with few options for redress.⁵ Finally, the ‘Illegal Immigration Bill’ currently going through parliament is already causing fear and anxiety among many young people as they hear about the new powers the Government is proposing to prevent them from claiming asylum and remove them when they turn 18. Some asylum-seeking and trafficked children, including those from Albania, could be returned before they turn 18 if their country of origin is on a government-devised list of ‘safe countries’.⁶

In addition, all young people subject to immigration control, regardless of their status, face one shared challenge – access to high quality immigration legal advice. Cuts to legal aid have created advice ‘deserts’ in some areas of the country where there are no local immigration lawyers who can support children with their applications and any appeals.⁷

With the environment for children subject to immigration control being so challenging for young people it is imperative that children’s social work and care is well informed, proactive, and tenacious in ensuring that any immigration or nationality difficulties faced by children in care and care leavers are well understood, proper planning takes place, and applications are made as quickly as possible by expert lawyers.

A new strategy for children’s social care

It is into this context of uncertainty that the government’s new strategy to reform children’s social care has been published. The strategy was written in response to the [Independent Review of Children’s Social Care, led by Josh MacAlister](#). It proposes reform across children’s social care provision including early help, children in need support under Section 17 of the Children Act 1989, child protection work and the care system. The strategy outlines activity which will take place over the next two years, after which the plans

²House of Lords Library (2018) <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/LLN-2018-0064/LLN-2018-0064.pdf>

³House of Commons Library (2023) <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cdp-2023-0114/>

⁴House of Commons Library (2023) <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-9737/>

⁵House of Lords Library (2022) <https://lordslibrary.parliament.uk/rwanda-policy-unaccompanied-children-and-age-assessments/>

⁶RMCC (2023) <https://refugeechildrensconsortium.org.uk/briefings-on-the-illegal-migration-bill/>

⁷Law Society (2022) <https://www.lawsociety.org.uk/campaigns/legal-aid-deserts/immigration-and-asylum>

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will be refreshed based on the progress made and learning from various ‘pathfinder’ programmes contained within the strategy. These pathfinder programmes are designed to test some of the strategy’s more ambitious reform proposals before committing to national rollout.

The strategy acknowledges that some of the proposals will affect children subject to immigration control and that their needs will need to be considered closely during implementation but provides little further detail. This briefing explores what the proposed reforms might mean and how they could be best implemented by local authorities to support children in care and care leavers who are subject to immigration control.

Reform of the care system is built around six missions for children in care and care leavers - all designed to improve their experiences and to help them thrive into adulthood. The missions include making improvements in relationships, placements, corporate parenting, education, employment and training, health and housing for care leavers.⁸ In this briefing we set out some of the main proposals to help achieve each mission, provide some commentary, and a set of questions for councillors, directors, and social work services. These questions are designed to be used when considering how each of the missions might be achieved for children subject to immigration control locally.

Mission One: By 2027, every care-experienced child and young person will feel they have strong, loving relationships in place

Key proposals include:

- £30 million over the next two years to increase the number of local authorities with family finding, befriending and mentoring programmes, including Lifelong Links
- Increasing accessibility and take-up of Independent Visitors
- Implementing and ‘opt-out’ model of independent advocacy
- Consideration of the introduction of a way for care-experienced young people to formalise a lifelong bond with someone they care about, such as a former foster carer or family friend
- Explore introducing new outcome measures to monitor progress in forming loving relationships by regularly asking young people about levels of loneliness and trusted relationships

Strong relationships are one of the central planks of wellbeing but children subject to immigration control often experience fractures in their relationships. This could be due to having a dispersed family, to traumas related to their migration journey or because of experiences in the UK like discrimination or living in poverty as a result of their immigration status. All these experiences place strains on familial and other close relationships. Supporting strong relationships in this context can be challenging and may require different approaches from children’s social care professionals.

For example, whilst the commitment to funding Lifelong Links programmes will likely have impact for children who are not subject to immigration control, the evaluation of the programme did not provide any substantive evidence about whether such a programme works for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children.⁹ The commitment to ensure better provision of independent visiting is welcome but because many unaccompanied asylum-seeking children enter the care system late in childhood they have minimal time to build a strong relationships with their independent visitor. The Independent Review called for

⁸Department for Education (2022)

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1147317/Children_s_social_care_stable_homes_consultation_February_2023.pdf

⁹Family Rights Group (2021) <https://frg.org.uk/lifelong-links/>

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independent visiting services to be redesigned to include care leavers¹⁰ and it is disappointing the government did not make this commitment in recognition that children who enter care late might need more time to build these strong relationships.

From our experience of working with unaccompanied asylum-seeking children, we also feel the recommendations do not do enough to address strong relationships between extended family members and particularly peers. Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children often form very strong bonds with each other, and these friendships should be treasured and supported. Too often the placement system, the National Transfer Scheme and the wider impact of the immigration system at large break these bonds by moving young people far from their extended family members and friends and further isolating them. Locally, we ask decision-makers to respect these friendships and urge local authorities to provide opportunities for unaccompanied asylum-seeking young people to make friends through youth groups or summer schemes, for example.

Things to consider:

- Children subject to immigration control are likely to have family in other countries. How can you support them to maintain good contact and strong relationships with these family members?
- Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children may not have any family and can be very isolated – what do loving relationships mean and look like for them as they adapt to life in the UK?
- When unaccompanied asylum seeking children do have extended and even immediate family members in the UK, the authenticity of these relationships is often treated with distrust. Whilst sensible (and proportionate) checks will need to be made, are adequate steps being taken to ensure these relationships / contact are being supported?
- Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children can form very strong bonds with each other given their shared experiences. Are you providing opportunities for these relationships to grow?
- Children subject to immigration control can benefit greatly from the strong loving relationships provided by foster carers. Do you have sufficient foster care places to ensure that all children who would benefit from a foster care placement can access one?

For more information:

<https://refugeechildrensconsortium.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/Relationships-Briefing.pdf>

¹⁰Independent Review of Children's Social Care (2022)

<https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/ukgwa/20230308122153/https://childrensocialcare.independent-review.uk/>

Mission Two: By 2027, we will see an increase of high-quality, stable and loving homes available for every child in care, local to where they are from

Key proposals include:

- Investing £3 million to deliver an initial fostering recruitment and retention programme in the North East and then expand nationally
- Continue reform supported accommodation through the introduction of regulation and inspections
- Improve workforce development and leadership in Children’s Homes
- Create two “Regional Care Cooperatives” to test a regional approach to commissioning placements

Improving placements for children subject to immigration control is particularly important for young people who may have been trafficked and for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children.

A crucial factor in a good placement is children’s safety. In 2020, 31% of trafficked children in care went missing. On average they went missing eight times compared to 6.5 missing episodes per child in the wider population of looked after children.¹¹ Ensuring that residential workers, supported accommodation staff and foster carers are well trained about the risks of re-trafficking and can respond to missing incidents robustly is crucial in keeping trafficked children safe.

Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children are often placed in supported accommodation - research by the Department for Education into the numbers of under 16s being placed in this accommodation (before this was banned) found that 26% of under 16s in this accommodation were unaccompanied asylum-seeking children.¹² This could be an example of an adultification bias for this particular group of children who are often treated as older than they actually are.

Unaccompanied children are not placed in foster care to the same degree as other children despite research suggesting that well trained foster carers can provide excellent care and improve outcomes for this group of vulnerable young people.¹³ It is our strong recommendation and hope that the proposed fostering recruitment and retention programme will include a strong focus on ensuring there are enough foster carers for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children.

Is your area becoming one of the Regional Care Cooperative Pathfinders?

Two regional areas will be selected as Pathfinders to test and learn from the proposed regional commissioning model. We have concerns that the regional commissioning model will create new challenges for children subject to immigration control – specifically unaccompanied asylum-seeking children.

¹¹ECPACT and Missing People (2022)

<https://www.ecpat.org.uk/Handlers/Download.ashx?IDMF=bb993f93-9445-4f75-bc1e-d051d76ab668>

¹²Department For Education (2021)

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/960067/Looked_after_children_aged_under_16_in_unregulated_placements.pdf

¹³See for example: <https://www.unhcr.org/uk/5d271c6a4.pdf>;

<https://eea.iom.int/publications/mapping-existing-training-family-based-carers-and-professionals-united-kingdom> and;

https://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra_uploads/fra-2016-libe_missing_children_21_april_2016_background_note.pdf

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The National Transfer Scheme which currently places unaccompanied young people with local authorities is now a mandatory arrangement meaning that unaccompanied children are being placed in every local authority in England.

We would like to see the two Pathfinders take a proactive and inclusive approach to ensuring that there is enough provision for unaccompanied children, spread out across the region and located in places near to the immigration legal advice, schools, colleges, healthcare, faith and other services and facilities that unaccompanied young people need to be able to access to thrive. We also think it's important that any move to regional commissioning is used to better support young people's relationships by ensuring that children who have become friends are moved together to maintain their relationships.

If your area is becoming a pathfinder we would be keen to work with you to ensure that this new commissioning model works well for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children. If you would be interested in collaborating please contact us.

Things to consider:

- Children subject to immigration control may require specialist foster placements – particularly those who are unaccompanied asylum-seeking children. Have you provided enough training and support to your foster carers to properly meet their needs?
- Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children are one of the groups most likely to be placed in supported accommodation. Does the supported accommodation you commission properly meet their needs and support them to adjust to life in the UK?
- If you place children subject to immigration control in children's homes have you commissioned places that can properly meet their needs in homes with well trained staff and strong leadership?

For more information:

<https://refugeechildrensconsortium.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/Placements-Briefing.pdf>

Mission Three: By 2027, we will strengthen and extend corporate parenting responsibilities towards children in care and care leavers across the public sector

Key proposals include:

- Strengthen the existing corporate parenting principles, particularly in ways that reduce the discrimination and stigma associated with the care experience
- Extending the corporate parenting principles to a wider set of bodies to improve multi-agency working and outcomes
- Work with the private sector explore how to provide extra, tailored support to care leavers

Children subject to immigration control can face other forms of stigma and discrimination in addition to those often felt by children in care and care-experienced young adults. Under international law, and the Children Act 1989 all children should be treated equally, with decisions made in their best interests and their rights upheld.

We encourage local authorities to take a close and honest look at their practices and decision making and consider if there might be ways in which children subject to immigration control, and particularly unaccompanied asylum-seeking children and young people might be treated differently to other young people in their care. We know for example that unaccompanied asylum-seeking children are more likely to be in supported accommodation than their peers¹⁴ and that they are less likely to have a concerning score on the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire routinely used to monitor mental health.¹⁵ As experienced by other black and minority ethnic children and young people in care there can be an ‘adultification bias’ that sees young people being treated as if they are older than they actually are.¹⁶

The extension of the corporate parenting principles is a welcome opportunity to engage with other statutory partners about how best they can support young people in care, and particularly those subject to immigration control. We would also however encourage local authorities to look beyond statutory partners. Children subject to immigration control may need specific services from the local community like cultural experiences of places of worship, and they will all need access to expert and consistent immigration legal advice. Local authorities can play an important role in helping to ensure that all the talents of the community and voluntary sector, and the statutory sector, are available and well used to support children subject to immigration control.

Things to consider:

- Review the experiences of the unaccompanied asylum-seeking children you support. Are they supported differently from other young people in your care? If so, explore if these differences are fair and warranted, or if they are based upon assumptions you have made about their needs?
- Consider how you are working with the local voluntary and community sector to support young people subject to immigration control. Do you have good access to immigration legal advice? Are

¹⁴Department For Education (2021)

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/960067/Looked_after_children_aged_under_16_in_unregulated_placements.pdf

¹⁵The Children’s Society (2018) <https://www.childrensociety.org.uk/information/professionals/resources/distress-signals>

¹⁶NSPCC (2022)

<https://learning.nspcc.org.uk/safeguarding-child-protection/children-from-black-asian-minoritised-ethnic-communities>

there charities or groups that support children subject to immigration control with their wellbeing and mental health.

Mission Four: By 2027, we will see an improvement in the education, employment and training outcomes of children in care and care leavers

Key proposals include:

- Expanding the role of the Virtual School Head up to the age of 25
- Extend Pupil Premium Plus with a further £24 million for educational support between the ages of 16 and 19.
- Introduce a ‘Gold Standard’ accreditation scheme for further and higher education institutions
- Refreshing and boosting the Care Leaver Covenant
- Increasing the Care Leaver Bursary for apprenticeships from £1,000 to £3,000

If children do not have long-term and secure immigration status in the UK by the time they reach 18 it can be more difficult for them to access further and higher education in the usual ways. In order for Virtual School Heads to make effective education plans for children subject to immigration control it’s important that immigration status is resolved early and that there are other plans in place in case children are still awaiting decisions and cannot access further or higher education straight away. We welcome the extension of Virtual School provision to 25 because it can take longer for young people subject to immigration control to undertake further and higher education because of delayed immigration applications or decisions.

For unaccompanied asylum-seeking children, not only can it be difficult to access further and higher education but it can also be challenging to obtain the grades necessary to do so. Research suggests that unaccompanied asylum-seeking children are typically 37.4 months behind non-migrant children across all GCSE subjects.¹⁷ It’s crucial that local authorities and virtual schools work closely with education institutions to put in place all the necessary steps so unaccompanied children can progress – including their English language skills and their GCSE-level English and Maths qualifications.

We urge local authorities to work closely with their local universities to ensure that there is support in place for all care leavers who may be subject to immigration control. Both the Universities of Sanctuary scheme¹⁸ and NNECL¹⁹ provide a range of resources to support universities in improving access for young people subject to immigration control.

Similarly, to access vocational education and work-based training, some types of immigration visa mean young people subject to immigration control cannot work, including those who are awaiting a decision on their asylum application. In these instances, we would urge local authorities to think about ways they can support young people to develop the skills and knowledge for employment through other training opportunities, volunteering and shadowing opportunities in industries they are interested in working in. Close working with local charities and businesses can result in exciting opportunities that will help young people to keep developing skills even whilst they are awaiting crucial Home Office decisions.

¹⁷Education Policy Institute (2021)

<https://epi.org.uk/publications-and-research/the-educational-outcomes-of-refugee-and-asylum-seeking-children-in-england/>

¹⁸<https://universities.cityofsanctuary.org/>

¹⁹<https://www.nnecl.org/>

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Things to consider:

- Is your Virtual School Head able to plan education effectively for children subject to immigration control? Are they able to provide alternatives if young people cannot access education as a result of their immigration status?
- Have you got high quality ESOL provision in place and good support to help unaccompanied asylum-seeking young people achieve the grades they need in English and Maths to progress?
- Some children subject to immigration control may not be able to work, which can restrict access to courses offering work-based training or apprenticeships. Are you working with local businesses and employers to ensure that young people can gain useful employment skills even if they cannot yet work?
- Have you forged links with your local colleges and universities to see how you can work together to support children subject to immigration control into further and higher education?

For more information:

<https://refugeechildrensconsortium.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/Education-Employment-Housing-Briefing.pdf>

Mission Five: By 2027, we will increase the number of care leavers in safe, suitable accommodation and a reduction in care leaver homelessness

Key proposals include:

- Increase the leaving care allowance from £2,000 to £3,000
- Making Staying Close a national entitlement
- Remove the local connection requirement for care leavers seeking access to social housing and strengthen homelessness provisions – for example around intentional homelessness
- Increase provision of supported lodgings model where care leavers live in a family environment

If young people subject to immigration control have long-term and secure immigration status in the UK then changes like the increase in the leaving care allowance and to homelessness law will be of benefit to this group. Again however, it is vital that any immigration challenges are properly resolved, well in-advance of age 18, in order for young people to be able to take advantage of everything on offer to them.

Expanding the ‘Staying Close’ scheme and making it a national entitlement could help support many care leavers, and particularly unaccompanied asylum-seeking young people, to transition into independent living. However, thus far ‘Staying Close’ support has been linked to children’s homes provision²⁰ and so this reduces the numbers of unaccompanied young people who might benefit from it as many do not live in children’s homes or in foster care (where Staying Put can apply) but instead live in supported accommodation. We urge local decision makers to see Staying Close provision as open-access for all care leavers, regardless of the placements they have been in, rather than as a form of support specifically linked to those who have lived in children’s homes.

Things to consider:

- How are you supporting care leavers subject to immigration control who do not have the right to rent their own home to develop their skills in managing their household and their finances?
- Review the accommodation you commission to support care leavers subject to immigration control to prepare for independent living. Is it suitable? Do they receive the support they need to succeed?
- Are any ‘Staying Close’ projects you are commissioning suitable for children subject to immigration control? Does the eligibility criteria restrict this support to those living in children’s homes only? If so, can it be expanded to include unaccompanied asylum-seeking children in particular?
- Are unaccompanied asylum-seeking care leavers making use of schemes like Staying Put (and Staying Close where available)? If not, what are the barriers to them utilising these support offers?

For more information:

<https://refugeechildrenconsortium.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/Education-Employment-Housing-Briefing.pdf>

²⁰Department for Education (2023)

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1132086/Staying_Close_2023_to_2025_-_application_guide_for_local_authorities.pdf

Mission Six: We will work closely with health partners to reduce the disparities in long-term mental and physical health outcomes and improve wellbeing for care-experienced people

Key proposals include:

- Update existing DfE/DHSC guidance on promoting the health and wellbeing of children in care and extend it to cover care leavers to the age of 25
- Work with NHS England and the DHSC to ensure that Integrated Care Boards and Partnerships are better at planning, commissioning and supporting children in care and care leavers with their health needs.
- Mandatory reporting of deaths or serious incidents involving children to include deaths of care leavers
- Ensure that social workers and other professionals in children’s social care at every level have a better understanding of children and young people’s mental health and wellbeing needs and are better able to support them effectively

When consulting with young people to inform the Independent Review of Children’s Social Care and subsequent government consultations one of the key messages from unaccompanied asylum-seeking children and young people was for local authorities and health services to do more to address the mental health challenges they face.

Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children face a range of challenges to their mental health often including experiences in their home country, traumatic experiences on route to the UK and their experiences when they arrive in the UK – often being disbelieved, experiencing racism and discrimination, and having to endure long periods of waiting to hear from the Home Office about their asylum applications.

Alongside ensuring access to specialist services it is important to acknowledge the impact good wellbeing support can have for young people – especially whilst they are waiting for Home Office decisions. Focusing on supporting their wellbeing through services like befriending, youth groups, opportunities to learn and be creative can all help sustain higher levels of wellbeing when things are challenging.

We encourage children in care and leaving care teams to engage with all children subject to immigration control in significant detail about what they feel supports their mental health and wellbeing and ensure that responsive services and forms of support are put in place. Professionals should not underestimate the sense of security and relief a young person can feel when they secure long-term status in the UK and can look towards their future with confidence.

Things to consider:

- The mental health needs of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children can be very complex and usually require specialist support, rarely available through the NHS. Have you got support services in places to meet the mental health needs of this vulnerable group?
- How can you work with partners in your Integrated Care Board and Partnership to ensure that the physical and mental health needs of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children are properly met?
- Do you provide support to improve the wellbeing of children subject to immigration control, and particularly unaccompanied asylum-seeking children through youth groups, independent visiting, activities and outings?

- What training can you provide to social workers and personal advisers so that they are better able to understand and respond to the mental health needs of children subject to immigration control?

For more information:

<https://refugeechildrensconsortium.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/Health-Briefing.pdf>

Leadership and Workforce Development

Given the importance of securing long term immigration status for children and young people in care it is crucial that professionals have a basic level of knowledge about immigration needs and are able to access expert legal advice and support from experienced colleagues when required. Good record keeping, detailed care and pathway plans, and strong oversight and procedures can all work to ensure that the immigration needs of children in care and care leavers are all spotted early and quickly addressed. We recommend that nationality and immigration status should be recorded on all case management systems to support this although we urge local authorities to put in place effective safeguards to ensure immigration data is not shared with the Home Office for enforcement activity.

By addressing immigration challenges quickly and efficiently children and young people will be better able to take advantage of other forms of support offered, particularly by leaving care teams, through access to employment opportunities, housing and further and higher education. In this way, it's clear that one of the very best ways to improve outcomes for this group of children in care is to ensure immigration needs are prioritised and addressed.

Embedding an immigration-aware approach in children’s social care will take time. The issue needs to be recognised and prioritised by Lead Councillors, Scrutiny Committees, and Directors alongside team leaders, social workers, independent reviewing officers and personal advisers, but if everyone has a good basic level of knowledge and are able to hold each other to account progress can be made very quickly.

Conclusions

We hope that you have found the information and questions in this briefing material useful. The Independent Review of Children’s Social Care and the Government’s strategy have not engaged with issues affecting children subject to immigration control in detail, but we hope the materials are helpful in allowing you to consider their needs as you implement any of the proposed changes.

Throughout the briefing we feel that two key messages are evident in almost every area of reform:

Firstly, with good systems and processes to identify and respond to all immigration and nationality challenges young people face, many problems can be solved allowing young people to access the full breadth of services and support available for children in care and care leavers.

Secondly, even with their immigration status resolved, it is essential to consider how each form of service and support you offer meets the needs of children subject to immigration control. Often simple tweaks to eligibility criteria and small changes in delivery can create services that are more inclusive and will help improve outcomes.

If you would like to discuss anything contained within the briefing in more detail please contact maya@slr-a.org.uk