

<b>TITLE</b>	<b>Draft UASC Strategy</b>
<b>FOR CONSIDERATION BY</b>	Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 20 June 2023
<b>WARD</b>	None Specific;
<b>LEAD OFFICER</b>	Director, Children's Services - Helen Watson

## **OUTCOME / BENEFITS TO THE COMMUNITY**

The purpose of developing an Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children (UASC) strategy is to ensure that our UASC receive the specific support they need to overcome trauma and build a new fulfilling life, contributing positively to the communities they live in.

## **RECOMMENDATION**

That the Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee:

1. Notes the content of the draft UASC strategy and how it complements the overarching Children in Care and Care Leaver strategy; and
2. Notes plans for its finalisation and implementation.

## **SUMMARY OF REPORT**

Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (UASC) are children who are outside their country of origin and are without the care and protection of their parents or legal guardian.

Our UASC are brought into the care of WBC, and receive support informed by the same strategy we apply to meeting the needs of any child in our care.

However, the often traumatic circumstances which lead a UASC to come into our care warrant a specific and tailored approach to supporting this cohort which complements and provides additional detail to the wider strategic approach.

This report:

1. Summarises the content of a draft UASC strategy which sets out the council's approach to supporting and caring for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (UASC), giving these vulnerable children the chance to rebuild their lives in safety; and
2. Lays out plans to ensure that the strategy is finalised and effectively implemented through robust governance.

## Background

Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children and young people (UASC), also known as separated children or unaccompanied minors, are children who are outside their country of origin and are without the care and protection of their parents or legal guardian.

Sometimes they may have witnessed or experienced traumatic events and they may be suffering the most extreme forms of loss. There are many reasons why children and young people may leave their home country. Some of the reasons include:

- fear of persecution, due to their religion, nationality, ethnicity, political opinion or social group.
- parents killed, imprisoned or missing.
- in danger of being forced to fight or become a child soldier
- war, conflict.
- poverty, deprivation.
- sent abroad by parents/family.

The draft UASC strategy sets out the council's approach to supporting and caring for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (UASC) giving these vulnerable children the chance to rebuild their lives in safety.

It is recognised that the strategic priorities for UASC, as laid out in the Children in Care (CiC) and Care Leavers' (CL) Strategy (*note that the strategic priorities have been updated since the current draft UASC strategy was written in February 2023*) and reproduced below, are the same as for any child in care or care leaver, however the circumstances which lead a UASC to come into our care warrant a specific and tailored approach to achieving the best possible outcomes for them. This UASC strategy provides additional detail and context to the strategic priority 10 "*Meeting the Unique Needs of our Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children*".

The cohort of UASC in Wokingham has increased significantly over the last year following the National Transfer Scheme (NTS) becoming mandatory, and an increase in the % of the child population allocated. Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children now represent approximately a third of our children in care population.

### ***Children in Care and Care Leavers' Strategy Strategic Priorities***

1. Being the best "corporate parents" that we possibly can be.
2. Ensuring that we put in place effective plans for children's futures.
3. Maintaining strong, respectful & trusted relationships with children.
4. Working towards permanent and stable arrangements for children.
5. Ensuring children have the support to develop their physical & emotional health.
6. Encourage children to engage in learning and to achieve their potential.
7. Making sure that children have a safe and suitable place to live.
8. Supporting children to access any leisure or cultural activities that they enjoy.
9. Supporting & encouraging children as they make their transition into adulthood.
10. Meeting the unique needs of our unaccompanied asylum-seeking children.
11. Listening to the views of children so they can shape and inform our work.

### ***Specific Support the Draft UASC Strategy puts in place***

## **1. Enhanced Advocacy Offer**

Our Advocacy Offer has been adapted to reflect the growing needs of the cohort. Currently, our Advocate commits to supporting all new UASC at their age assessment and their first Children in Care review.

## **2. Enhanced Training Package**

In order to ensure we can respond appropriately to the needs of our UASCs we have commissioned new training via CoramBAAF ([About us | CoramBAAF](#)).

This training supports social workers to better understand the specific needs of separated young people. There are two courses within the training package:

- Immigration status of migrant children in care.
- Legal rights and entitlements of young refugees.

## **3. Legal Advice**

Support is provided to UASC with access to a specialist immigration solicitor to ensure that there is no delay in following legal process.

## **4. Age Assessment**

Our advocate for children and young people attends age assessments to support UASC, alongside provision of appropriate translation services following [guidance provided by the Association of Directors of Children's Services \(ADCS\)](#).

## **5. Translation Support**

Wokingham Borough Council has engaged *DA Languages* to provide translation services, with a choice of in-person, video or phone translation as appropriate.

## **6. Emotional Health and Wellbeing**

UASC are at a high risk of developing mental illness but they often present with already challenging and high-risk behaviour and poor mental wellbeing that does not always meet diagnostic criteria for mental illness. Even when it does, typical Child and Adolescent Mental Health (CAMH) services are not equipped to meet the presenting need.

We know that children in care, including UASC, tend to have complex needs that are:

- Multiple
- Persistent
- Severe
- Framed by family and social contexts
- Influenced by many Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)

NICE guidance now recognises that a different approach is needed: Trauma Informed thinking or the Trauma recovery model.

Following the findings of our last Focused Visit in April 2022, the specification for our new Children in Care (CiC) CAMH service has been reviewed and updated to ensure that it specifically includes and caters for our UASC population.

The CiC CAMH service provides:

- An Initial consultation/advice as required
- Ongoing therapeutic consultation to the system around the young person/trauma recovery model.
- Direct assessment.
- Direct intervention.
- Training for teams.

The interventions are based on the:

- Trauma recovery model.
- Mentalisation-based approaches.
- Whole system approaches.

Mental Health First Aid training also been commissioned, the programme includes all the elements of the accredited Youth Mental Health First Aider (MHFAider®) course, plus bespoke content relating to the experience and mental health needs of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children.

## **7. The Virtual School**

Significant improvement work has been undertaken in this area informed by consultation with other South-East Regional Virtual Heads.

In December 2022 we were involved in a Peer Review led by the National Association of Virtual School Heads, this piece of work scrutinised our approach and aimed to provide us with information to support our continuous improvement.

This work has included a review of the Virtual School UASC offer. This resulted in significant improvements which were formalised and shared with relevant teams and partners:

- Development of a UASC Specific Personal Education Plan.
- Commitment to provide daily small group tuition for young people not yet admitted to school, or those who are on roll but need additional ESOL support.
- Providing a flexible education offer: inc. information, advice and guidance to other professionals when placement break down results in disruption to education.
- Increased opportunities for young people for wider wellbeing: Science days, Football Holiday Camps, Music Tuition, Arts and Creative Writing
- Broader and enhanced offer for UASC:
  - Introduction of a UASC specific app with Wokingham Council Branding. This app provides different packages of support including ESOL, access to learning resources, Life in UK, Mental Health Support and Money support.
  - Introduction of 'school-ready' bags.
  - Winchmore Tutors 'Welcome' package.
  - 1:1 ESOL tuition.
  - Introduction of the first language Race Equality and Minority Achievement (REMA) assessments.

### ***Supporting UASC to stay in the Borough***

Predominantly, UASC are placed outside of Wokingham due to the shortage of a local supply of suitably matched placement options. By placing children in foster homes or semi-independent homes in London, for example, we are more likely to meet their cultural identity needs and it is more likely that they will live near people they know. London also has the greatest density of diverse placement options giving greater opportunities for appropriate matching.

By recruiting and training more local fostering and supported lodgings carers alongside developing community links and specialised staff and resources we will aim to provide for more UASC when they initially come into our care. These children and young people will therefore also have the opportunity of 'Staying Put' with many of their carers.

More younger children placed within or close to Wokingham will allow us to develop more 16 plus accommodation and support options. Ultimately, allowing more UASC children to live within or around Wokingham until they are adults will provide greater stability for them to access good education, training and employment opportunities. These young people will also have a right to local permanent housing.

### ***Finalisation and Implementation of the Strategy***

#### **1. Put the Right Support in Place**

Much of the support detailed above is already in place. It is a dynamic support offer which will be continually reviewed and improved to ensure it is responsive to the emerging needs of our UASC.

#### **2. Establish a UASC Steering Group**

A UASC Steering Group has been set up to finalise the strategy and ensure that it continues to reflect prevailing need.

The steering group will develop a UASC strategy action plan setting out how the key challenges will be addressed and actions implemented and monitored. This will be monitored on a monthly basis to review and record progress.

#### **3. Set up a Community Hub**

We will develop a hub of support in collaboration with foster carers, trained social workers, mentors and UASC experienced people at the core. The hub will include support from CAMHS, Education, Community groups and advisors to ensure that we can welcome, support and re-settle new UASC arriving in Wokingham.

We will look to open a physical space once a month to run a Youth Programme tailored to our UASC. The Hub could provide informal education that includes mentoring around basic skills, healthy eating, asylum rights and responsibilities, social awareness, and sleep hygiene.

#### **4. Market Development and Engagement**

We will develop a market engagement plan to increase local sufficiency. This will focus our market development and engagement approach on encouraging providers of fostering, supported lodgings and semi-independent accommodation to establish new provision within and close to the borough.

We will establish Provider events to promote our needs within the locality. These events will set out our current and future requirements.

This activity will support us to increase overall placement sufficiency, as well as complement the investment in local authority provision.

**5. Community Engagement**

We will develop a UASC fostering marketing plan to promote fostering opportunities within diverse communities. This will include an array of marketing activities including social media, press releases, advertising, editorial, staff promotion, WBC emails, stands out in the community and utilising the fostering website and Facebook pages as platforms for raising awareness of the need for more local foster carers. We will proactively engage with local and National community groups to promote fostering.

***The Draft UASC Strategy***

Further detail on the rationale for the strategy, the characteristics of the current UASC cohort and implementation plans can be found in the attached “Draft UASC Strategy”.

**FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE RECOMMENDATION**

***The Council faces unprecedented financial pressures as a result of; the longer term impact of the COVID-19 crisis, Brexit, the war in Ukraine and the general economic climate of rising prices and the increasing cost of debt. It is therefore imperative that Council resources are optimised and are focused on the vulnerable and on its highest priorities.***

	How much will it Cost/ (Save)	Is there sufficient funding – if not quantify the Shortfall	Revenue or Capital?
Current Financial Year (Year 1)	N/A	N/A	N/A
Next Financial Year (Year 2)	N/A	N/A	N/A
Following Financial Year (Year 3)	N/A	N/A	N/A

<b>Other financial information relevant to the Recommendation/Decision</b>
N/A

<b>Cross-Council Implications</b> (how does this decision impact on other Council services, including properties and priorities?)
N/A - no decision required.

<b>Public Sector Equality Duty</b>
Please confirm that due regard to the Public Sector Equality Duty has been taken and if an equalities assessment has been completed or explain why an equalities assessment is not required.

Equalities assessment to be completed as part of the work to finalise the strategy.

**Climate Emergency – This Council has declared a climate emergency and is committed to playing as full a role as possible – leading by example as well as by exhortation – in achieving a carbon neutral Wokingham Borough by 2030**

Please state clearly what the impact of the decision being made would be on the Council’s carbon neutral objective.

Accommodating our UASC into the Borough will reduce emissions due to travel to destinations outside Wokingham to visit children.

**Reasons for considering the report in Part 2**

**List of Background Papers**  
Draft UASC Strategy

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